Starstruck

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Starstruck

by DyraDoodles

Summary

Zack's limit break always mimics people who end up shaping his life in one way or another. Once he's met them, he can use a break similar to one of theirs, no problem.

This time, there is a problem: He's mimicked someone with the power to blow up a solar system, and he has no idea how to control it.

He'll have to track them down, and hopefully get them to take an active role in not just teaching the limit break, but his entire life.

(On Hiatus)

Notes

New year, new multichapter LOL

This one doesn't have a set update schedule since I'm still working on Redux Hero, but I'm very excited to work on this fic! It started off as a silly oneshot idea of Zack getting Supernova as his Seph limit break, and then the more I wrote of it the more it became clear it was gonna be a lot longer than I thought. Also, there is an optional prologue in the form of my Iconic Instruction oneshot, if you're curious how Zack and Seph's first meeting went!

Summoning Stars

It had been years since Zack accepted that his limit break was not always *technically* his own. His break was a weird form of mimicry, taking on various other limit breaks from friends, or family. By the time he joined SOLDIER, it was clear that his break copied people just after meeting them. Every time, the person he mimicked was someone important to him, eventually. Always someone who altered the course of his life in some significant way.

Whether said person was a friend or foe was the true gamble.

Zack didn't mind, though—He loved *people*. Loved meeting them, loved learning about them. It was one of the reasons he joined SOLDIER in the first place. The more missions he went on, the more people he could potentially meet, and befriend. The more people he befriended, the more limit breaks he learned.

Though, it had been a while since it actually *triggered*, with all his amazing, faster-than-lightning SOLDIER reflexes—

"Zack, look out!"

Angeal's warning brought Zack's thoughts back to the fight at hand just in time to get tackled by a hedgehog pie. The blow knocked him off his feet, slamming him into the hard, dry dirt. Pinned, Zack found himself face-to-face with the hedgehog pie's enormous maw.

Before he could even shout in alarm, Angeal was there, disrupting the monster's assault with a brutal punch of his own. The hedgehog pie went flying to the side, buying Angeal enough time to roughly drag Zack to his feet.

Zack staggered, reorienting himself back into a fighting stance. "Sorry, Angeal—"

"Apologize later. For now, *focus*," Angeal ordered.

"Right!" Zack nodded sharply, charging back into the crowd of hedgehog pies he was meant to be eliminating. This should be a simple mission for a Second—just routine monster extermination on the outskirts of the Mythril Marshlands. Despite his initial distraction, this fight would be a breeze—

Or, it would, if he didn't immediately get blasted by a Fira.

Zack brought up his sword to block, but not quick enough on the draw, the magic burning through his defenses and knocking him to his knees. Zack fell with a grunt of pain, but as soon as he hit the ground, he felt a surge of strength blitz through his veins.

Limit Break.

"About *time*," Zack shouted irritably as he stood again. The group of hedgehog pies were approaching quickly, and Zack eagerly tapped into that extra boost of strength.

When it activated, he felt the familiar *unfamiliarity* of a new break.

He expected Angeal's Rush Assault, with how long it had been since a new one got mimicked, but this one felt like magic. *Powerful* magic, and he set it loose with abandon, sure it would help even the odds.

The magic of the new break ripped through the air, dizzyingly overwhelming, with the full force of an exploding star.

As the spell burned through the group of monsters, Zack could barely grasp it—Only the echoes of magic hurtling through space and time, faster than he could ever hope to make sense of—Like a comet bypassing the entire solar system, just to kickstart the chain reaction that would annihilate his enemies.

The limit break engulfed the entire field in flames, tearing through everything in its path.

When Zack came back to his senses, he was met with scorched earth. Every hedgehog pie was dead, as well as a few stray trees and a very large portion of the field they stood in. Zack stared at the ruined space in awe, uttering, "...*woah*."

"Zack?!" Angeal ran to meet him now that the attack was finished, horrified and concerned all at once. "What the hell was that?"

"Uh," Zack faltered, grinning sheepishly at his mentor. "...Mimicked a new limit break?"

Angeal sighed, pensively looking over the massive amount of damage. "Do you know whose it is?" he asked.

"I was kinda hoping you knew," Zack pouted, realizing the last time

he hit his limit break was…*weeks* ago. He met so many people since that last Rush Assault—This break could be from any one of them.

"I would remember if I'd ever seen a limit break this destructive…" Angeal trailed off, uneasily surveying the damage again. "You need to be careful with it, Zack. Maybe don't use it unless you have to."

"If I find out whose it is, I can ask them about it!" Zack said, not wanting to give up on the new break's usefulness so quickly. "They'll probably know how to handle it, right?"

At length, Angeal begrudgingly nodded. "Let's head back and ask around," he decided. "If they're here, I'll put in a word at HQ that we need extra time in the field—You'll have to learn all you can from them, and that's assuming they're here in the first place."

Zack nodded in agreement, though sullenly. There was more to the limit break than just wanton destruction. There must be. Casting a glance over the fried forms of the hedgehog pies again, Zack wondered what it was like to be in control of such a powerful limit break—It was a spell, after all. Those required concentration. Calculated tactics. There must be some sort of strategy behind it, not just danger.

After all, limit breaks were meant to protect their user.

"Let's go, Zack," Angeal called to him, already walking away and back toward the small village. "We'll talk to the mayor first and let him know the job's done."

"…Got it," Zack replied, tearing his eyes away from the remains of the battlefield.

The mayor was happy to have the monsters taken care of, but he couldn't provide the SOLDIER operatives with any leads about the owner of Zack's new limit break. Angeal and Zack backtracked, asking everyone they ran into prior to its use. The innkeeper likewise didn't know. Neither did his daughter. Nor the newly promoted Security Officer that drove them to the area. Even the secretary Zack happened to befriend at HQ, before he left for the mission, had no clue.

So, Zack found himself sitting on a couch, on the SOLDIER floor, bouncing his leg and wracking his brain to remember every single person he met in the past few weeks.

The person would have to be important to Zack somehow. At least, they would be. Zack wasn't sure he could figure that out from one meeting.

"Zack," came Angeal's voice from behind him. "I see you're working hard."

Zack sat upright, twisting around to see his mentor. Though, as he did, he saw Angeal hadn't arrived alone—None other than SOLDIER First Class *Sephiroth* stood next to him. Zack's initial greeting trailed into an awkward, heartfelt, "Uhh…"

Sephiroth, looking perfect as always in his flawlessly tailored uniform, remained impassive to Zack's surprise. "Hello again."

"Hi," Zack finally *actually* greeted, moving to stand. "Right, you—" He looked from Sephiroth to Angeal, his brain finally catching up to what was happening.

"You forgot, didn't you," Angeal observed, a patient smile on his lips.

"N-No," Zack protested, now recalling Sephiroth was going to train him while Angeal was out on a solo mission. "I didn't…exactly." He rubbed the back of his neck, glancing self-consciously at Shinra's star SOLDIER operative. Who would now *train* him.

That was today?

Angeal shook his head good-naturedly. "I've briefed Sephiroth on your level goals for this month. I'll be expecting you to stick closely to whatever regimen he gives you."

"Right," Zack said absently, quickly realizing increasing his level would involve fighting. Which meant— "What about my new limit break?"

Angeal grimaced. "...Avoid it, for now."

At that, Sephiroth frowned at his fellow First. "You want him to avoid his limit break?"

"Zack's breaks are…unique," Angeal answered. "This one is too destructive. He doesn't know how to control it."

"Then he needs to use it more often," Sephiroth determined, "not less."

“It’s more complicated than that—” Angeal began.

“How so? It’s his limit break,” Sephiroth countered, shifting to cross his arms. “He should know how it functions.”

“It’s kinda *not* mine, is the thing,” Zack piped up with an awkward laugh. “Mine mimics other peoples’ breaks,” he explained to Sephiroth, inwardly reeling at the idea of having to explain something to the SOLDIER Hero. Someone *vastly* more experienced, and far more powerful, besides. “This limit break is—”

Then it hit him. He met Sephiroth in the right time frame—Three weeks ago, so Angeal could introduce them before Sephiroth agreed to train Zack. And Sephiroth was strong. Stronger than *anyone*. And smart enough to use some sort of ultra-destructive magic that could wipe out a solar system.

“Does your limit break blow up a star?” Zack asked Sephiroth suddenly.

Angeal scoffed. “Zack, Sephiroth’s limit break is Octaslash—”

“No, it isn’t,” Sephiroth interrupted him.

Angeal stared at Sephiroth, lips still parted. “…Come again?”

“Octaslash is merely a sword form I developed,” Sephiroth elaborated. Then, to Zack, amazingly, he inclined his head and confirmed, “My limit break is Supernova.”

“It’s *yours!*” Zack declared, instantaneously buzzing with excitement. He mimicked *Sephiroth*, of all people. Sephiroth, SOLDIER Hero. Poster boy. Most powerful man on the *Planet*, and he was gonna be a key figure in Zack’s life—

Though, in retrospect…it felt a bit obvious.

Unlike Zack, Angeal did not meet the revelation with enthusiasm. His brow was furrowed as he thought, pensive, as he softly asked, “Why didn’t I know your limit break?”

“I don’t typically take enough damage to trigger it,” Sephiroth answered smoothly, as though he had to answer this question a million times before. Again, he turned to Zack. “You said your limit break mimics people?”

“Yeah, people important to me, when I meet them!” Zack explained exuberantly, already eagerly clenching his fists at the thought of learning the same magic Sephiroth used. “So I’ve got Supernova now!”

The briefest flash of surprise crossed Sephiroth’s features. Then his expression went neutral again, his gaze dropping in thoughtful, quiet contemplation. “...I see.”

“You can teach me how to control it!” Zack went on. “I don’t have to avoid my limit break while we train!”

“Well, that *does* settle one issue,” Angeal admitted. To Sephiroth, he added, “Help him reign it in, alright? It’s too dangerous as-is.”

Sephiroth met Angeal’s eyes, silent for a time. Ultimately, he nodded.

“Alright!” Zack cheered, raising his fists. “Meet ya in the Training Room!” he told Sephiroth, and then promptly sprinted off down the hall.

“No ‘goodbye’ for your mentor?” Angeal shouted after him.

“Love ya, Angeal, bye!” Zack responded quickly, waving, and then dashed through the door to the Training Room. He didn’t bother with the module settings, figuring Sephiroth would take care of it when he caught up. For now, Zack was *far* too excited. He went into the VR room, bouncing with every step.

He didn’t have his limit break ready to go, but they could figure that out. More importantly, Sephiroth might give him a demonstration of Supernova. Zack would get to see how the attack worked *first-hand*.

When Sephiroth did eventually follow him into the VR room, he looked far less thrilled. “Angeal explained what happened on your last mission,” he said, walking to stand opposite Zack, almost like he was facing Zack down as an opponent rather than a trainee. “Based on his description, you didn’t perform it correctly.”

“Yeah,” Zack winced, thinking back to the burnt field. “What is it supposed to do, exactly?”

Sephiroth went quiet, turning his face, expression hidden in his long hair.

Zack waited, curiously. If it were anyone else, he’d almost think the guy was hesitating. But this was *Sephiroth*—There must be some other,

badass reason for the dramatic pause.

“The Supernova you performed dealt a set amount of damage,” Sephiroth explained, still not looking at Zack. “Used properly, the damage should be fractional, as well as inflict your opponent with Confuse, Silence, and Sleep.”

Zack’s suspicions about Supernova being more than just a singular, powerful attack confirmed, his eyes widened at the actual description. “It does…*huh?*” he questioned, unsure how something that should be *one* damage spell could also cast *three* status effects. Some materia did that, but they were incredibly rare. These effects were *mean*, too, especially in combination.

Then, the damage method itself was…odd.

“What do you mean it’s ‘fractional?’” Zack asked. “Like…Like there’s *math?*”

“There is math involved, yes.”

Zack groaned loudly, hanging his head back as he came to terms with how complicated this was becoming. Sephiroth *was* out of his league. Made sense his limit break might be, too. Still, math? In an attack? Awful. It was like the time Angeal tried to make Zack calculate how much damage he would have to deal a Dual Horn with a combo of Libra and Gravity—

Then, all of a sudden, it clicked.

“*Oh,*” Zack uttered, smacking the palm of his hand with his fist. *Gravity* spells dealt damage in fractions. Supernova must act like gravity, which tracked. Supernovas. Gravity. Space things. “I get it!”

Sephiroth finally looked at him then, wearing a dubious frown. “Do you?”

“It’s a space attack,” Zack declared. Then, seeing Sephiroth vaguely narrowing his eyes at him, he realized he needed to actually explain his thought process. “Uh. The damage—It’s like Graviga?”

Drawing his hand to his chin, Sephiroth considered the statement. “I suppose it is similar.”

“And then there’s status effects,” Zack continued. “So it’s like a Dark—No! *Hell* Graviga.”

"...If that's what makes sense to you," Sephiroth relented, apparently seeing it a moot point to try and correct Zack further.

Must be close *enough*. Zack grinned, proud of his comparison. "So, what's it like to use it? Can you show me?"

"No," Sephiroth stated immediately. "It will take too long to build my limit break. We will have to work with yours."

Zack deflated. So, no demonstration after all. "Then, do I just fight some VR monsters until then?" he asked.

"There's no need for that," Sephiroth informed him. Then, worryingly, he drew Masamune. Even *more* worryingly, he shifted his stance, very clearly intending to fight.

"Woah—*Wait*, hang on," Zack spluttered, one hand reaching for his own sword in a panic. "You don't mean—?!"

"It will be faster if we spar," Sephiroth said simply, clearly waiting for Zack to get ready. "I can also ensure you won't be knocked out and lose your progress."

"But—!"

"Draw your sword, SOLDIER."

Zack did, albeit slowly, worried now that Sephiroth would beat him in four seconds and determine Zack wasn't worth the effort after all. He lowered himself into his own defensive position, checking himself—He would, in fact, have to get beat up to use his limit break. Probably. That's how they usually worked. And, logically, Sephiroth wouldn't be finished with him until he at least *saw* Zack use Supernova, right?

Said Supernova meant Sephiroth had to be more than just Zack's one-time substitute mentor.

So, maybe it was fine. Maybe Sephiroth would be nice. Maybe he'd go easy on Zack.

With that, Zack nodded to the First, bracing himself to get his ass kicked.

Zack went flying for what felt like the fiftieth time in an hour, rolling heavily as he hit the ground. When he managed to finally curb his momentum, he splayed out on the floor like a starfish, head still

swimming from Sephiroth's last attack. "*Ow*," Zack groaned, emphatically. If this was Sephiroth playing nice, he sure as hell didn't want to see what *mean* looked like.

"What's your limit's status?" Sephiroth questioned, apparently not concerned as to whether Zack was okay.

He *was* okay, with the exception of his pride, but Zack pouted up at the ceiling anyway. Then belatedly answered, "I think…this isn't working."

"Do you know the cause?" Sephiroth asked.

Zack sat up, unsure. In theory, his limit break should work like anyone else's—Take damage, build the limit, release when it breaks. Or, he *thought* it would. It only happened in battle, after all, so why wouldn't it? Zack rubbed the back of his head, realizing there would be no shortcut through the typical methods. His limit break was just going to work however the hell it wanted, as usual.

How to explain that to *Sephiroth*, though…

"Well, it's sorta…kinda random?" Zack attempted to explain. He tried once, with Angeal, and Angeal's response had been to largely give up on ever understanding it. Then, also telling Zack he needed to figure it out. Zack didn't know if Sephiroth might have more patience for Zack's verbal flailing. "It'll trigger when I'm fighting, but not because I'm getting hit. At least, I don't think." He grimaced, all too aware of how little the information helped. "It just…happens."

Sephiroth stared at him, lowering Masamune. "So…there's no sense trying to build it through typical methods," he summarized. "Is that what you mean?"

"Uh, yeah. Probably," Zack replied glumly. Admitting that he was *definitely* wasting Sephiroth's time hurt nearly as much as the blow from Sephiroth's sword. "It's not…I don't know how to make it happen when I want it to, like other people can. I can pick when to *use* it, but…"

Sephiroth turned his head, pensive. "...Hm."

"Sorry," Zack muttered, shifting on the floor into a defeated hunch. "I honestly thought this would work. It's just—"

"Random…" Sephiroth uttered, though perhaps mostly to himself.

"...but only in battle." He met Zack's gaze again, frowning. "We'll try a different tactic. Get up."

Zack scrambled to comply, only stumbling a little from the lingering pain of Sephiroth's last attack. Before he could even think to ask for a break, he felt the warm, fizzy feeling of curative magic sweeping over his body. He looked up at Sephiroth, finding the First's arm just dropping, after casting the Cure. "Uh. Thanks."

"If your limit break will still trigger without taking damage, you will theoretically be able to use it while not engaging your opponent," Sephiroth stated.

"So, I shouldn't try to fight you?" Zack surmised. At Sephiroth's affirming nod, he placed his own sword on his back, relieved. Still, if he wasn't fighting, that begged another question: "Then, what am I supposed to do?"

Sephiroth raised his free hand, the shimmering power of spellwork immediately flaring to life. "Dodge," he instructed, just before he sent a fireball hurtling toward Zack.

With a yelp, Zack leapt out of the way, the Fire just missing him. He turned his head to shout at Sephiroth, "*Seriously?!*"

"Yes," Sephiroth answered, magic sparking to life again. "I can assess your footwork while we're at it."

This time Zack felt the air around him drop several degrees, and he looked up to see a Blizzard forming right above his head. A quick roll got him out of the way, but he stumbled back onto his feet. A glance at Sephiroth revealed the First was already on his next spell, and before Zack could blink, a bolt of Thunder knocked him right back onto the floor.

"You'll have to be quicker than that," Sephiroth chided.

"Is a *little* warning too much to ask?!" Zack shot back, shoving himself into a sitting position, and then rubbing his chest to rid himself from the sting of the spell. "I thought this was just training!"

"You won't get warnings from your opponents," Sephiroth told him, lowering his hand. "Read their movements and react to that."

Zack pouted, just barely biting down the remark that Sephiroth was probably the most *unreadable* guy in SOLDIER. Still, he had a point.

Even Sephiroth must have patterns. Little tells. He might be the best operative SOLDIER ever had, but he was still a person—Zack just had to learn how to read him.

He would have to do it fast, too, as Sephiroth raised his arm again.

Being so focused on Sephiroth, Zack almost didn't notice when the familiar thrum of his limit break hit his veins. The realization that it was finally ready stopped Zack in his tracks. An act he immediately regretted, as a Blizzard bonked him right on the head.

"*Ack—!*" Zack flinched, grabbing his head with both hands.

"Why did you stop moving?" Sephiroth inquired, arm still outstretched.

"Limit break's ready," Zack informed him. As he said the words, he felt the same, overpowered surge of magic, just waiting to be released. Definitely Supernova, thankfully. Would've been embarrassing if he ran around the VR room for twenty minutes just to hit Rush Assault or Chain Slash.

Sephiroth relaxed, and then ordered, "Use it."

"Uh—" Zack faltered, surprised. "Y…You mean on *you?*"

"Obviously."

"Isn't that gonna hurt?" Zack questioned, feeling his skin itch with the need to release his limit break, but still hesitant to actually assault his superior with such a dangerous spell.

Sephiroth looked surprised, briefly, only to chuckle. "You needn't be concerned. Cast it."

Zack set his jaw, still reluctant, and concerned nonetheless. "…Okay," he relented, knowing the whole *point* of this was for Sephiroth to see why Supernova wasn't working the way it should. "What's the key to doing this?"

There was a flicker of something in Sephiroth's eyes then, gone too quick for Zack to parse. Sephiroth merely inclined his head, clearly ready to take on whatever damage Zack hurled at him, and replied, "Concentrate."

The instruction brought Zack back to the first time he met Sephiroth.

The simple evaluation on whether he would train Zack at all. The advice to breathe, reorient, and try again.

So, Zack concentrated, focusing on the overwhelming power of the spell flaring at his fingertips. He took a breath, and then aiming right for Sephiroth, let loose.

Once again, Supernova felt too strong for Zack to fully control. This time though, he could grasp it just a little better—Plot its course. Direct it. Funnel the massive explosion of energy at a target, instead of obliterating everything in its path.

With that smidge of extra preparedness, Zack felt an end point. A cut off, where the spell could stop, but before he could figure out how to contain an exploding star and *not* murder his new mentor, it slipped out of reach.

Zack's awareness staggered out of the limit break, feeling drained, and frustrated. And then, looking up, *horrified*.

Sephiroth, so confident he could bear the break, had been brought to his *knees*.

"Sephiroth?!" Zack called to him, already running to his side. "Are you okay?! Was that too—"

"—wrong," he heard Sephiroth grunt out, his voice rough with pain.

"What?" Zack pressed, kneeling beside him.

"You did it wrong," Sephiroth repeated, straining, dropping Masamune to the floor. He was holding his side, despite the lack of visible injuries, and breathing far too heavily for Zack's liking. "That was flat damage, again."

"Okay, got it wrong, gotcha," Zack jabbered, hands fidgeting as he tried to figure out how to help. "Can I—" he hesitated, just about to take hold of Sephiroth's pauldron. "You okay if I touch you?"

Sephiroth turned his head to look at him, confused. "Why are you asking me that?"

"I wanna bring you over to the wall, so you can sit," Zack explained, gesturing between Sephiroth and the aforementioned wall. "You don't seem like the kinda guy to like being touched, though. So, can I?"

“I…” Sephiroth stared at him, brow still furrowed. “...suppose?”

“Great! Okay,” Zack slipped his arm under Sephiroth’s, moving the First so his arm was slung over Zack’s shoulders. Then, he carefully took hold of Sephiroth, helping him stand. “Here we go,” Zack said, leading him over to the wall.

Sephiroth went willingly, though still watching Zack with an openly puzzled expression as he sat heavily with his legs outstretched.

With Sephiroth situated, Zack stood up again, asking, “Want me to go grab you a potion? The ladies by the front desk give me these really awesome ones—Should fix ya right up.”

“That’s…” Sephiroth shook his head, a small, amused smirk on his lips. “I can heal myself,” he told Zack. “Supernova does nothing to mana.”

“Oh,” Zack uttered, somewhat embarrassed he made Sephiroth move at all, in that case. “That’s—That’s good! You should do that.”

Shaking his head, but still smiling, Sephiroth tapped into his materia again. A warm, green glow sparkled over his form as the high-level magic did its work. “You’re strange,” Sephiroth commented idly.

“I am?” Zack questioned, squatting to talk to Sephiroth at his level.

“Yes.”

“...Why?”

“Most SOLDIER operatives would still be a bit…” Sephiroth paused, thoughtful. “...starstruck, in my presence,” he elaborated. “You don’t seem to care.”

Zack opened his mouth, the question of what that was supposed to mean halfway on his lips, when he realized the word play. Or, potential word play. Starstruck—like Supernova. Getting struck with the force of a star. Zack bit his lips together, suddenly realizing the word was applicable on *so* many levels—

“...What is it?” Sephiroth inquired, studying Zack’s expression once more.

“Oh! Uh, sorry,” Zack laughed sheepishly. “Just—You said *starstruck* and all I can think of is how we’re dealing with space stuff. There’s

gotta be a pun in there somewhere, right?"

Sephiroth's eyes fell shut as he chuckled. "I see."

"Ah, I got it!" Zack snapped his fingers. Then, grinning broadly, he continued, "I guess you could say my Supernova left *you* pretty starstruck, huh?"

The pun earned him a scoff. But an amused one, at least. Still, Zack was aiming for more.

"Hmm, no good?" Zack asked, tilting his head, still grinning. "Though, after getting hit that hard, a pun's a pretty bad constellation prize."

That one got another chuckle, to Zack's delight, despite Sephiroth quietly uttering, "Atrocious."

"I think you'll find my sense of humor is outta this world," Zack teased.

"*Enough,*" Sephiroth said through a laugh.

Zack beamed, his injured pride from failing to use Supernova already forgotten, with the sight of Sephiroth's smile. "Y'know, they do say laughter's the best medicine."

"I've found healing magic to be more effective," Sephiroth countered, pulling his PHS from his pocket. After checking it, he grew serious again, stating, "We still haven't figured out why Supernova didn't work, and it's getting late."

"Yeah," Zack agreed, frowning as he tried in vain to come up with a reason the spell was on the fritz. "I really did concentrate on it," he insisted.

"I know," Sephiroth told him, moving to stand. "We'll see what can be done with it next time." As Zack stood with him, he instructed, "For now, pinpoint where in the sequence it started going wrong. Don't use it for anything other than flat damage."

"Got it," Zack smiled, already feeling infinitely better, with the confirmation that Sephiroth was still willing to help. Plus, the bonus—he wouldn't have to avoid using Supernova at all, like Angeal first suggested.

"Until then," Sephiroth said, inclining his head to Zack, and then

turning to leave.

"...Hey," Zack called after him, just before he walked out the door. "How was my dodging? I know I got hit at the start and the end, there, but…"

"Better than most could do, when faced with me," Sephiroth divulged. The soft smile was back—the clearest indication Zack could get that Sephiroth was pleased. "You did well," Sephiroth added.

And with that, he left.

Those parting words of praise had Zack back to buzzing with excitement. His limit break might still be a pain, but it didn't matter. He did *well*. Sephiroth was impressed with him. Laughed at his dumb puns. Was helping with more than just a limit break.

Zack had never felt so confident that such a new, burgeoning friendship was going to lead somewhere good.

Training Troubles

Chapter Summary

> Zack trains with Sephiroth, leading to more discussion of how his limit break functions, and how it affects his chances of success in First Class. Angeal, Zack finds later, feels differently.

Chapter Notes

> Hello!!! Been a while for this one! Life's been a bit crazy so I've only really had time for writing one multichapter, but I'm definitely still working on other projects. Such as Starstruck :D Finally getting the teensiest smidge of CC plot in here, now lol

A couple weeks later, Zack found himself in a wide, grassy plain, fighting a bunch of little screaming weeds apparently known as Mandragora. They only reached about mid-calf, but the little anklebiters were relentless in their quest to break his eardrums with their high-pitched screeching. Zack cast Fira, delighted to find he was correct in assuming the living grass was, indeed, extremely flammable.

The big Ahriman swooping at him, however, was less so.

Zack quickly took a swing with his sword, slashing across the flying monster's wings. It collapsed to the ground, next to its burnt up brethren. Zack beamed with his success, turning to face his own comrade, and striking a prideful pose. "There! Not bad, huh?"

Sephiroth watched him from several yards away, arms crossed and unimpressed.

"What's that look for?" Zack questioned, gesturing around them to the beautiful, open area around them. "I won, and now we get nice, peaceful sunshine!" It was, of course, fake sunshine, manufactured by Shinra's VR tech, but it still *felt* like a nice break.

"You're going to get hit," Sephiroth stated flatly.

"Huh?" Zack titled his head, unsure of what Sephiroth could mean.

Then something big barreled into him from behind, knocking him flat on his face.

Zack groaned, lifting his head to see the Ahriman, still very much

alive, and fangs bared. Bracing himself to get bit, Zack ducked his head under his arms with a yelp.

He heard a crack of Thunder, and the Ahriman landed in a heap next to him.

“Turning your back to the enemy. Overconfidence will destroy you,” Sephiroth reprimanded mildly.

“I—I totally had it, until then…” Zack complained, getting to his feet. He pouted at the Ahriman as it disappeared. “Besides, it wasn’t as bad as last time,” Zack grumbled.

“Last time?”

Zack felt his cheeks heat up with the embarrassing memory. “Uh. Angeal had me take on a Dual Horn,” he explained. “Materia training. I thought I beat it and it…rammed me from behind.” He winced to himself, recalling the bruises on his back from the blow. “Knocked me out for a bit.”

Sephiroth looked less than pleased by the tale. “Does this happen often?”

“No!” Zack protested quickly. Then, remembering another time with an Epiornis—and another with a Bomb—and *another* with a— “...I mean, not *all* the time,” Zack amended, avoiding eye contact.

“I’m surprised Angeal hasn’t trained that habit out of you,” Sephiroth commented.

The way Sephiroth said it almost sounded like he blamed *Angeal* for the screw ups, which baffled Zack. “It’s not Angeal’s fault,” Zack argued, crossing his own arms. “It’s mine for getting distracted.” When Sephiroth only narrowed his eyes, Zack faltered in his conviction. “...Right?” he added weakly.

“It is Angeal’s responsibility as your mentor to oversee your training,” Sephiroth stated firmly. “Turning your back to the enemy when you only *believe* you’ve won is a habit he should have addressed by now. What did he say about the Dual Horn?”

“That I lost my focus,” Zack recalled. Then, remembering the disappointment in the words, his shoulders slumped. “...again.”

“And?”

“And…nothing?” Zack said, confused. Losing focus easily was Zack’s biggest problem. Angeal knew that. It didn’t warrant more explanation. “I lose focus all the time. It’s…I’m trying to work on it,” he elaborated, for Sephiroth’s sake. “That’s why I asked you how *you* concentrate, when we first met.”

Once more, Sephiroth said nothing, only narrowing his eyes at the information. His gaze dropped from Zack, contemplative as he watched the virtual blades of grass at their feet. At length, he took his PHS from his pocket, and with a few clicks reset the training module.

Zack glanced between Sephiroth and the reforming monsters with alarm. “Uh—?”

“You still have several levels to get through before reaching Angeal’s goal,” Sephiroth explained as the newly programmed Mandragora let out mighty, tiny screeching. “This time, I’ll observe your finishers more closely.”

“My—?” Zack started, only to let out a yelp as the new Ahriman dove at him. He dodged out of the way, and then begrudgingly got back to work.

The battle went much the same as the last one.

This time, though, Zack knocked the Ahriman to the ground and proceeded to have a staring contest with its giant, ugly eyeball. He glowered at the monster, wordlessly daring it to try and get back up and hit him again. It didn’t move. Eventually, the program registered the Ahriman as dead, and it disappeared in a flash of blue, digital artifacts.

Conflict *resolved*.

Zack turned proudly to Sephiroth, spinning his sword in triumph. “Well?”

“You handled it differently,” came the bland observation, rather than the praise Zack had been hoping for.

“Uh…yeah,” Zack agreed. “Obviously.”

Sephiroth shook his head, evidently disappointed in Zack not understanding what he’d meant. “Specifically, this time you verified its death. You didn’t do that when you were excited about your victory.”

Zack still didn't see the problem. He focused. Right? That was the whole point, wasn't it? "...So?"

"So, that pose you did—"

"Wait, you're not gonna make me stop doing victory poses, are you?!" Zack interrupted, dismayed at the very thought.

"They're unnecessary," Sephiroth retorted, annoyed.

"But it's my thing…" Zack complained.

"You do them often?" Sephiroth inquired, seemingly unmoved by Zack's distress. At Zack's sorrowful nod, Sephiroth looked him over again, assessing. "Do you typically do them at your opponent, or your comrades?"

Zack's brain went blank at the question, having never thought of that before in his life. "Uh. I dunno," he muttered self-consciously. It felt more impressive to do it toward his comrades, if he really considered it—Looking like the cool, super-powered SOLDIER, saving the day. "I guess…the latter?"

That information seemed to give Sephiroth an idea. "Perform it at your opponent, from now on."

Wondering what that could possibly fix, Zack was already thinking of how it would go—Fighting a monster, beating it, and then posing *at* it. If he'd posed at the Ahriman, it's not like it would react—He would just be staring at a corpse—

…but, he would've seen what *should* be a corpse get right back up again.

"*Oh!*" Zack exclaimed, excitedly punching his hand as the idea clicked. "So I can keep an eye on it!"

Finally, the soft, pleased smile was back on Sephiroth's face. "I would still advise you not to celebrate early," he cautioned, "but in cases like these, where you believe your opponent is already defeated, it would be best to have a method of confirming before turning away."

"Yeah, makes sense!" Zack grinned, ready to put this new technique into action. "So, what's next?"

Next was, predictably, more monsters to fight. Angeal had left some

pretty lofty level goals, apparently expecting Sephiroth to work Zack to the bone. Zack didn't mind though—Sephiroth's scrutiny could be blunt, but it was blatant he was trying to help Zack improve.

Plus, the training was already going better, now that Zack was working in his new victory methods. Sure, it might not be as impressive to teammates, but he felt a little more confident with every win. Every confirmed kill, knowing there would be no monsters popping up behind them when they shouldn't.

After several more battles, though, Sephiroth was starting to get that curious frown on his face again.

"I'm going to check your level," Sephiroth informed him, before setting up the next module. "Ignore the spell, and keep fighting."

"You got it!" Zack replied, sword at the ready.

Zack felt a little ping at the edge of his awareness as the spell hit him, but it was nothing too distracting. He let it pass over him, slashing at a Bomb. The monster only grew larger in response. Knowing he would have to take it down fast, Zack quickly cast Blizzard.

The block of ice knocked the monster out in one hit.

Not feeling the slightest drain on his mana, Zack cast another Blizzard at an incoming Hedgehog Pie. Much the same way, his spell had no cost, and crushed his opponent into nothing. Zack beamed as he fought, getting a rush of energy as he took on monster after monster.

There was another ping—Libra, again.

Since Sephiroth said nothing, Zack ignored it again. His blade tore through another Hedgehog Pie simulation, and Zack spun on his heel, landing a flawless finisher. As the next monster hopped closer, Zack was brimming with confidence—he was on a *roll*.

After cutting down the last of them, there was yet *another* ping from Libra.

Zack took a look at Sephiroth, finding him puzzling over whatever information the spell was giving him. "Hey," Zack called, "what's with all the checks?"

"You cast multiple spells, but didn't expend mana," Sephiroth stated, still frowning as he parsed the Libra's scan.

“Oh,” Zack laughed, not surprised in the least. “Yeah, that happens sometimes.”

“You also leveled up,” Sephiroth announced.

“Oh!” Zack brightened further.

“Twice,” Sephiroth clarified, not nearly as elated as Zack. In fact, Zack was beginning to suspect the little furrow of his brow meant he was absolutely bewildered.

“Oh—”

“*During* battle,” Sephiroth added.

“…ah,” Zack uttered, deflating as he understood. Leveling up usually happened *after* battles. But, not for him. Not always. Just another weird aspect of his person. “That, uh…That also happens sometimes.”

Sephiroth finally met his gaze, uncomprehending. “…Explain.”

“Well…So, everybody’s got, like, set points for leveling up, yeah?” Zack began, hoping Sephiroth was following, because if he lost him this early then nothing Zack said next would make a lick of sense.

“Thresholds,” Sephiroth clarified. “Yes.”

“Right, so, best as I can figure, I hit those thresholds, but don’t always level up,” Zack said, running on many, many years of trying to figure out why he wasn’t leveling up as fast as he should. Or, faster than he should. Like now. “There’s a *chance* I’ll level up when I hit the threshold, but sometimes I don’t. And other times I just get everything at once.”

“…leading to multiple level increases,” Sephiroth concluded, thoughtful again. He pondered the information for a moment, only to ask, “Does Angeal know about this…quirk?”

Zack, nearly about to say yes, hesitated, suddenly doubtful. Surely they had that conversation. At some point. Ages ago.

…Maybe.

“…I don’t remember if I told him,” Zack answered honestly.

“Why would he insist on increasing your level if you can’t do so reliably?” Sephiroth continued, perplexed.

“Dunno,” Zack shrugged. “I’m not the mentor.”

Sephiroth regarded him with a curious expression.

Unlike the times when people would be baffled and annoyed by Zack’s nonsensical nature, though, it felt somehow different. Zack didn’t feel the need to shrink and apologize for how strangely he functioned—or to explain that it frustrated the hell out of him, too. As he held Sephiroth’s gaze, and watched Sephiroth’s eyes drift to Zack’s sword, Zack wondered why this conversation was nerve-wracking and yet… easier than usual.

“What other effects happen to you during battle?” Sephiroth asked.

“There’s a lot,” Zack informed him, counting on his fingers as he tried to remember them all. “No mana cost, no magic damage, no physical damage—”

“You randomly become immune to damage?”

“Yeah, sometimes I get totally invincible!” Zack elaborated with a grin. “But, it is random. I’ve tried staying aware of what stat boost I *might* get, but then I just get distracted with *that*…”

“This is all tied to your limit break,” Sephiroth concluded.

It was the same conclusion Zack came to, years ago, but didn’t quite know how to explain. He nodded, relieved he didn’t even have to try. “It’s like a whole system thing,” Zack described. “Only thing I can control is when I use a break, once it’s ready. Otherwise stuff just… happens.”

When Sephiroth broke eye contact to stare somewhere across the field again, vaguely in the direction of a large, walled-off lake, it was clearer that he was simply processing.

Zack rested the tip of his blade in the grass, waiting. If it were Angeal, he would’ve expected an instruction by now—*It can’t really be random. Figure it out*, or something along those lines. Zack would have to just work harder, since that much uncertainty during battle could be a liability. One that could cost him, dearly, if things went awry. No pattern Zack could see, just bad luck.

And, it could definitely happen during his evaluation for First.

A little worried now that Sephiroth would see it as too much of a risk,

Zack spoke up. “I made it all the way to Second Class with this *random* limit break, y’know.”

“I’m aware,” Sephiroth replied absently.

“It’s…I can make First, too!” Zack stressed. “Sometimes I have to brute-force it, but…”

“That’s my concern,” Sephiroth stated, uncrossing his arms as he looked up. “You’ve relied so much on brute strength and luck thus far, your basics have been neglected.”

“Basics?”

“Your form can be sloppy, and you’ve developed harmful habits,” Sephiroth told him frankly. “Ordinarily, a SOLDIER operative would strive to use their limit break’s abilities in conjunction with proper training. You rose through the ranks quite quickly, correct?”

At the absolute evisceration of his talents, Zack grimaced. “Well—So did you!” he countered petulantly.

Sephiroth took the snappishness in stride. “I did,” he acknowledged, “therefore, I am in a position to tell you that strength and luck alone won't carry you forever. If you can’t rely on these bonus effects, or even when your level increases, then I don’t think you should—” He cut himself off suddenly, at some realization. His hands clenched into fists, and he turned, only half-facing Zack.

Worried now about the sudden silence, Zack leaned the same way, trying to get a glimpse of Sephiroth’s expression through his bangs to no avail. “I shouldn’t…what?” Zack prompted nervously.

“…I think I should speak with Angeal about this,” Sephiroth said softly. Before Zack could even begin to fret about what that sentiment could mean, Sephiroth addressed him directly again. “For our next session, make a list of all the boosts and status changes linked to your limit break,” he ordered. “I’ll review it and go over it with Angeal, to make a more appropriate training regimen.”

Not expecting those instructions in the slightest, Zack’s head tilted as he made sense of them. “Then…I can still shoot for First?”

“Of course.”

So, he hadn’t been implying Zack wouldn’t be a good operative. Just

that he needed better training. Customized training, that not only prepared him for a higher rank, but worked *with* his chaotic limit break.

“Oh,” Zack uttered, surprise melting away into excitement. “Okay! I’ll make the best list ever!”

“*A* list will suffice,” Sephiroth corrected gently. Then, he drew his PHS out again, messing with the module settings. “For the time being, I’ll assign modules based on average leveling thresholds, so we can at least ensure you hit those. Complete them, and inform me if you hit Supernova.”

“Sir!” Zack saluted in response, beaming, and then hefted his sword back into position, ready for more.

After training with Sephiroth, Zack made the list of bonuses in record time. He surprised himself, not only with how quickly he compiled the information, but with the information itself—*Eleven* different buffs, excluding limit breaks. When he included those, it bumped the count up to fourteen, with the potential to grow. Then there were duds, but duds were rare. He included them on the list, just to be thorough, but he also made sure to note they didn’t happen very often. Probably wouldn’t be a problem.

When Angeal returned from his mission, Zack greeted him on the SOLDIER Floor with a tackle-hug. Angeal, as usual, fended him off good-naturedly, directing him immediately to the Training Room.

Once inside, they fell into a typical routine.

“Now,” Angeal said, turning to face Zack with a Libra in hand, “to check your progress.”

Almost as soon as Zack felt the magic, he blurted out, “I didn’t hit the goal. I was gonna try to yesterday, but I still needed to get a list to Sephiroth for what my limit break does—”

Angeal held up his empty hand to silence Zack’s prattling. He reviewed whatever information Libra picked up for him, and then sternly frowned. “Sephiroth, huh?”

“He said he was gonna talk to you about it.”

“Strange…” Angeal muttered to himself. He moved to the main hub

for the module controls, flipping through the different options to pull up Zack's data. "Sephiroth is usually more of a taskmaster." He looked back at Zack, a puzzled expression on his face. "He didn't prioritize your level?"

Zack rubbed at the back of his neck, diverting his eyes away awkwardly. It wasn't that Sephiroth didn't want Zack to hit the goal. Zack just…didn't. Sephiroth didn't even seem to mind, last they talked, so preoccupied with Zack's limit break. "He didn't think focusing on my level was gonna help," Zack explained, trying to remember exactly how Sephiroth put it. "Did he not mention it?"

Angeal heaved a sigh, pulling his PHS from his pocket. "Let's see…" he mumbled, clicking through. "...ah. Yes, he did send a message." Reading through it, Angeal's frown deepened. Then, at length, he shook his head, closing the device. "I suppose that's Sephiroth for you," he commented, sounding frustrated, yet resigned.

"Huh?" Zack uttered, head tilting in confusion.

Angeal smiled fondly at his protege, and then shrugged. "Sephiroth has been the top operative for a long time. He can get a bit…" He smirked, his tone turning a little more teasing. "...stubborn. He'll do whatever he thinks is best, regardless of what anyone else says."

"That's…" Zack trailed off, feeling like he was missing something. "...a bad thing?"

"At times," Angeal answered vaguely. "You can still learn a lot from him. Just keep in mind—The most important aspect about being in SOLDIER is maintaining your *honor*."

Zack shifted in place, trying to make sense of how honor had anything to do with leveling up. Or, in this case, not leveling. Or, maybe Sephiroth couldn't teach Zack about SOLDIER honor…?

No, that couldn't be—Not when Sephiroth was the top operative.

Angeal, apparently taking Zack's lack of response for thoughtful consideration, began setting up a new module. "Since you didn't hit your level goal, we'll get that done first. Get ready to grind."

"*Nooo,*" Zack groaned loudly, slumping forward dramatically. "But Angeal—!"

"No excuses," Angeal stated, and then gestured for Zack to go into the

VR room.

Zack did, albeit still grumbling quietly, “Sephiroth said level grinding wouldn’t prepare me for First.”

“He is right about that,” Angeal replied, easily catching the words with his enhanced hearing. “You do still need to learn how to carry yourself.”

Drawing his sword, Zack faltered at how exactly he was supposed to carry himself. “Meaning…?” he prompted Angeal, shifting into his fighting stance. It felt awkward now. Clumsy. What did Sephiroth say before? Something about his form being sloppy?

“The truly strong channel their power into everything they do,” Angeal said solemnly, arms crossed over his chest as the module started running.

“*Huh?*” Zack responded emphatically, ignoring the cold steel of the room melting away to reveal a wide, open field.

“If you want to be a First, you’re going to have to act like one,” Angeal elaborated. “That means, having discipline, and *focus*.”

Zack breathed, watching as the virtual monsters began to form in front of him. He didn’t feel focused. Just confused. And stressed. He managed this far into SOLDIER with his usual tactics, but both Sephiroth *and* Angeal agreed he was missing something. If he was going to have discipline, like Angeal said, then…what did that look like? Trying harder? Sephiroth had seemed to want him to try something else entirely.

An Epiornis sprang to life, squawking at Zack before running to peck him to death.

Facing the enemy head-on, Zack braced himself for a long, *long* training session.

A lucky trigger of Supernova blasted through another couple of ostriches, and then Zack collapsed on one knee, exhausted.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Angeal announced, ending the module with a few button presses on his PHS.

Zack couldn’t even feel relieved, so frustrated with his own

performance. The fight was harder than it should've been—Too many ostrich kicks to the abdomen made it a nightmare to keep his grip on his sword, even now. His hand shook just swinging the blade irritably onto his back.

"You lost your focus," Angeal noted from the sidelines.

"I *know*. I get it," Zack snapped, shoving himself to his feet.

"That last limit break—Supernova again?"

"Yeah…" Zack groused, staring at the floor where the fried Epiornis used to be. He was sure, now, that the only reason he managed the fight was the randomness of his limit break. A surprise shielding from physical damage kept the worst of the monsters' attacks at bay. But, Sephiroth was right, that wasn't reliable. Even Supernova, powerful as it was, still only caused a set amount of damage. "It's not supposed to do that…" Zack grimaced.

"Well, maybe that's just the form it takes for you," Angeal suggested, casually activating Libra to check Zack's levels again.

"But that's not how my other breaks work!" Zack protested, turning to vent his frustrations toward Angeal. "That's not how *Rush Assault* works!"

Whatever Libra was showing Angeal, it wasn't good, judging by the man's stern frown. He shook his head, meeting Zack's anger with a serious expression of his own. "You're spending too much time worrying about your limit break," Angeal stated. "It's a natural part of life—An extension of yourself. Having a mental block like this *will* impact your abilities."

"It's not a *mental block*," Zack argued. "I'm doing it wrong!"

"It's your limit break—"

"It's *Sephiroth's!* He said—"

"*Zack,*" Angeal growled, silencing the Second. He brought his hand to the bridge of his nose, heaving a sigh before continuing. "I know what Sephiroth said, but he only just started training you. I've seen how you fight for a long time now." Angeal relaxed, somewhat, though there was still a thread of irritation along his brow as he smiled at Zack. "You're strong, but you're disorganized. Today was no exception. You have to train your *focus.*"

Zack deflated, still not feeling like that was really the issue, but not wanting to fight about it. Angeal wasn't exactly wrong, after all. He *did* need to focus better. "...I guess," Zack mumbled, gaze dropping sullenly to the floor.

"You're dismissed for the rest of the day," Angeal informed him, a little more gently this time. "Go get some rest—Get your mind off of things." As Zack walked past him, Angeal laid a hand on the Second's shoulder, amiably. "Don't worry. You're a talented operative. You'll figure this out."

"Yeah," Zack agreed, smile strained as he looked up at his mentor. "Thanks, Angeal."

Angeal nodded, giving one final pat as Zack left.

Zack walked out of the Training Room, feeling far less confident than his words had been. He made his way to the elevator, planning to head back to his apartment for a shower, and hopefully a good sulk on the couch. Kunsel might pity him enough to go halfsies on a decent pizza dinner.

As the elevator doors closed, Zack caught the gaze of his own, miserable reflection on the metal. He looked worn down, Second Class uniform in disarray from fighting. He straightened it, wondering just *when* exactly he could hope for the purple threads to be replaced with black.

Then, suddenly, he realized he forgot to ask Angeal if he even leveled up.

Rubbing gloved hands roughly over his eyes, Zack groaned in frustration. He shouldn't worry about it. As Angeal said, he'd figure it out. Plus, Sephiroth could talk to Angeal about that new regimen he'd mentioned. A *new* plan to get Zack to First Class, that hopefully didn't involve getting his ass continuously kicked by ostriches.

The elevator began to descend, and Zack swore to himself he would ask Sephiroth about it at the very start of their next session.

When Zack went to meet with Sephiroth for their scheduled training, the VR room was closed for repairs. Some kind of accident, according to Kunsel.

Zack found Sephiroth's number, and called, but Sephiroth didn't pick

up.

Worryingly, neither did Angeal.

Testy Teachers

Chapter Summary

> Zack gets to train with Sephiroth again, and find out why the VR room was in need of repairs. Then, catches part of Sephiroth's conversation with Angeal, about Zack's potential for First Class.

Chapter Notes

> I'm starting to think this fic has an unofficial "once a month" update schedule lmao

Both Sephiroth and Angeal eventually got back to Zack—Angeal replied that he was swamped with a sudden influx of missions, but that he had a module plan for Zack when he returned. Sephiroth gave no explanation, only acknowledging they needed to reschedule, and setting up a time for when the VR room would, theoretically, be repaired.

The repairs took weeks, even with the Maintenance team working almost non-stop.

When the day to train with Sephiroth finally arrived, Zack walked through the Training Room to find Sephiroth already in the VR, observing something. As Zack entered, he saw it was his own, old data, that Sephiroth was apparently reviewing. “Heya,” Zack greeted him with a grin. “Studying up?”

Sephiroth seemed to ignore that the question was a joke, answering it with a nod. “I’d wondered if doing your victory pose while facing the enemy would be enough to resolve things,” he explained. He turned to Zack, all business, as the Data Zack engaged in battle with a Hedgehog Pie. “Judging by your previous performance, we should also find a better method for you to confirm your kills.”

“Oh, okay,” Zack said, not sure what Sephiroth meant. Until, that is, he watched the virtual copy of himself approach the not-dead enemy, only to get startled as it reared up and nearly impaled him on monster spikes. Zack winced.

“You should avoid getting so close,” Sephiroth instructed, also watching as the Hedgehog Pie proceeded to chase Data Zack around. “Until it starts dissipating, at the very least. Unless you plan to attack

it again."

Zack winced again as his Data self was knocked on his ass, only to blast the monster with Fire. The Hedgehog Pie sprawled on the ground, unmoving, once again. Zack walked toward the hologram, drawing his sword. Wandering to a space near the enemy, where he thought he might stand if he could try this fight again, he assessed the creature, unable to remember if he'd actually killed it with that spell. Instead of waiting though, he stabbed the hologram with his sword, and then looked to Sephiroth in askance. "Like that?"

"More or less," Sephiroth confirmed. "If you have the mana, it's easier to prepare a spell from a safe distance."

"Spells. Got it," Zack muttered, mostly to himself, distracted by how normal the whole session had been so far—No mention of the VR room's need for repairs. Or why Sephiroth hadn't gotten back to Zack for so long. Sure, the guy was busy, but—

"Have you fought a summon before?" Sephiroth inquired, interrupting Zack's musings.

"Uh. Nope," Zack answered sheepishly. "Never dealt with summon materia, before, really. I mean, I know what they do, and look like, but…"

Sephiroth didn't seem surprised by it, though he hummed in a way that sounded displeased. "Summons can create spaces not unlike this room," Sephiroth said. "When defeated, the magic used to create the space will disappear along with the creature."

"So…if the space it made is still *there,* it's not dead," Zack concluded.

"Precisely."

It was good to know, and Zack was grateful for it, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off, today. Sephiroth was always pretty focused, but today he was somehow *too* focused. Like he only wanted to talk about why they were here, right now, and nothing else.

And, strangely, no mention of whether he spoke with Angeal.

"Is something the matter?" Sephiroth asked, clearly picking up on Zack's hesitance.

"No, but…" Zack trailed off, not entirely sure *what* to ask. His eyes

roamed over the newly rebuilt room for ideas, only for him to blurt out, “What happened in here, anyway? How come it was closed for so long?”

Sephiroth went silent, his gaze dropping in a way that almost looked ashamed.

Zack stood there, confused and waiting. As the silence stretched, he began to wonder if maybe it *wasn’t* pauses for dramatic effect, after all —Sephiroth might genuinely need the extra time. Arranging his thoughts, maybe, in a way Zack wished he knew how to do better.

Though Sephiroth’s face remained impassive, Zack picked up on a heaviness in the air around him.

Whatever happened in the VR room, Zack realized, it must have been bad. Bad enough for even *Sephiroth* to seem crestfallen. He was about to voice his concern, when Sephiroth finally spoke up.

“A sparring match, with another First,” Sephiroth explained softly. “Things got…out of hand.”

So, *Sephiroth* was partly to blame for trashing the VR room.

Zack would have laughed, because of course the room couldn’t handle a match like that, but Sephiroth’s demeanor worried him. Sephiroth, normally so composed, seemed so…*down.* Plus, the implication of a battle getting ‘out of hand’ was one Zack was all too familiar with—So many instructors described his fighting style as almost exactly that. Zack fidgeted where he stood, unsure how to help—if he even could. “Is…Is that other First okay?” he asked, realizing Sephiroth hadn’t really clarified that matter.

Sephiroth turned his head, expression obscured, though Zack had a hunch it was because Sephiroth looked more obviously upset by the question. “He…should be,” Sephiroth replied.

“What about you?” Zack continued, looking over Sephiroth to see if he could spot any injuries. “Are you okay?”

Something about the question seemed to reset Sephiroth, in a way. He stiffened, turning back to Zack with his usual, impassive expression. “Fine,” he answered.

The abruptness of the shift made Zack all the more suspicious. “Okay…” he replied, doubtfully. Sephiroth wasn’t much of a talker on

a good day, though, so Zack wondered if maybe he was just overstepping. “If you don’t wanna talk about it, you don’t have to,” he stipulated, “but…You also don’t have to pretend you’re fine, if you’re not.”

If Zack’s initial inquiry was a minor reset, then *that* statement was a full reboot.

Sephiroth’s expression seemed to crack at it, caught so off-guard. He regarded Zack with open confusion. “Pretend…?” Sephiroth questioned.

“Sounds like a rough time,” Zack shrugged, unsure why Sephiroth was confused in the first place. “You don’t have to act like you’re not upset about it. Heck, you don’t even have to train me today, if you don’t want to,” he added, though he hoped the latter wasn’t the case. Still, he would rather Sephiroth not force himself to keep Zack out of trouble, if he was already dealing with extra shit.

The heaviness slowly lifted, and Sephiroth’s lips twitched into a barely-there smile. “Admittedly…I did almost cancel on you,” he revealed. The smile faded as his gaze fell back to the floor. “I haven’t spoken with Angeal about your limit break, yet, with everything going on.”

“That’s fine. I get it,” Zack told him honestly. He flipped his sword in a lazy circle, noting that Sephiroth hadn’t mentioned wanting or needing to cut the session short. “...so, since you *didn’t* cancel…” he prompted, eyeing Sephiroth hopefully.

“I thought it prudent to continue your training, regardless,” Sephiroth said, perking up a little. “...considering Supernova.”

Zack grinned, relieved. “You got my list, right? About my limit break?”

“I did. What exactly are the ‘duds’ you mentioned?”

“Oh, those,” Zack laughed awkwardly, trying to wave off the matter entirely with a literal wave of his hand. “I don’t…really know? It’s like my brain just stops, outta nowhere,” he explained, though even as he did, he fretted he was doing it poorly. “Like…imagine a bucket dropped outta the sky and bonked you on the head, when you’re expecting your limit break.”

While it was doubtful that Sephiroth fully understood, based on the

description, it had him nonetheless *concerned*. “It sounds incredibly distracting.”

“Yeah, it is,” Zack agreed, “but, it hasn’t happened in a long, *long* time! I almost didn’t include it on the list.”

“It’s good that you did,” Sephiroth told him. “The more information you’re able to give me, the better.”

Feeling all the more glad he went the comprehensive route, Zack nodded proudly. “Sure.”

“With so many effects, and the random nature of it, the entire system seems akin to a game of chance,” Sephiroth concluded, largely to himself.

Zack lips parted in surprise at how accurate the statement was, in comparison to Zack’s own feelings. “Yeah. Yeah, exactly! It feels like spinning a roulette wheel, or…or a slot machine! Just one affected by my own emotions and stuff.”

“...emotions,” Sephiroth repeated quietly, brow furrowing.

“Do you think we can figure out Supernova, the more we know about my whole…thing?” Zack asked.

Sephiroth didn’t answer immediately, only to sigh softly through his nose. “I don’t know,” he admittedly, ultimately. He met Zack’s gaze, a determined glint in the mako glow. “I do believe if we understand your limit break system, enough to understand its shortcomings, you’ll be better able to account for them during battle.”

“So…maybe it won’t help Supernova, but it can’t hurt to know,” Zack determined. “Right?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe the system needs a name,” Zack thought out loud. “Calling it ‘the system’ feels too wordy.”

Sephiroth chuckled, pulling out his PHS, presumably to set up a training module. “I’ll leave that to you.”

“Gotta be something cool…” Zack muttered to himself. “Mental slot machine…Mind Roulette…Hmm.”

“Perhaps it will come to you when you aren’t focused on it,” Sephiroth

suggested smoothly, as blue, boxy lights appeared around them. The lights coalesced, turning into the more familiar forms of various monsters. “We’ll try to test Supernova again, before getting back to your regular training. Twenty minutes, then we shift gears, regardless of whether you hit your limit break or not.”

Zack eagerly readied his sword, knowing Sephiroth wasn’t expecting him to mind-numbingly slay each and every beast. Twenty minutes to hopefully get lucky, and land his limit break. Easy.

Once the VR monsters were snarling, Sephiroth set up a timer. Then, he simply turned to Zack and said, “Begin.”

While Zack did manage to hit Supernova, the attack was once again basic, flat damage.

Sephiroth stood with his arms crossed over his chest, thoughtful yet frustrated. “You mentioned this sort of issue hasn’t happened before, correct?”

“Right,” Zack sighed, relaxing out of his stance, mirroring Sephiroth’s frustration. “Chain Slash and Rush Assault work, no problem.”

“Hm.”

“I can tell there *is* an endpoint I should be hitting for Supernova! I just don’t know how,” Zack complained. “Plus, there’s status effects, right? How do you do those?”

“I don’t put much thought into it,” Sephiroth replied, “apart from casting. I know what equations are involved.” He drew his hand to his chin, thinking. “...I could look into that, for next time.”

“Equations,” Zack repeated with dread.

“Yes. Astrophysics.”

“*Math*,” Zack clarified with a moan. “Are you *sure* you can’t just show me?”

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Sephiroth declined, immediately.

The answer, Zack noticed, was different from the last time he asked. Oddly so. It was one thing for it to take a while for Sephiroth to build up his limit break, but for it to not be *wise?*

Before Zack could question the word choice, Sephiroth shook his head. “That’s enough of that, for now,” he stated. “Basic drills for the rest of the session should suffice. According to my calculations, you’ve already hit the threshold to level up. We’ll see if you hit it during your training exercises.”

“Exercises…? Wait,” Zack brightened. “Then, no grinding?!”

“No,” Sephiroth confirmed with a small smile. “I’ve noticed you telegraph quite a bit, so today we’ll work on your precision.”

The whole concept sounded concerningly stiff. “But precision stuff is boring…” Zack pouted.

“Yes. Basics are boring. They are no less important.”

“I can’t concentrate when it’s boring,” Zack groaned, though he knew he wouldn’t be getting any sympathy for it. Every other instructor insisted he just buckle down and *do* it, even if it was physically, mentally, *emotionally* painful to do something so incredibly dull. Even Angeal would’ve chastised him at this point, reminding Zack to ‘get serious—’

Sephiroth, though, seemed to take Zack’s complaints in stride, ignoring them entirely and shutting down the combat data with his PHS.

Zack squinted at the First, wondering if this, like everything else so far, might be different with Sephiroth. After all, Sephiroth *was* pretty good about granting reasonable allowances. So, Zack decided to test his luck, asking, “Can we make a game out of it?” despite fully expecting to be told this *wasn’t* a game.

As Zack hoped, the question piqued Sephiroth’s interest. “How so?”

“I dunno,” Zack admitted, having not thought he would get this far into the idea. “Maybe I get points or something, depending on how precise I am? Oh!” He hit his hand with his fist as another option occurred to him. “Or I could do it to music!”

“Aligning your movements to a consistent beat could make them predictable,” Sephiroth countered, shooting that one down immediately. He did grow thoughtful again, though, much to Zack’s delight. “…I could evaluate you with points, however,” he muttered. “Eventually, you would be able to rate yourself, by reviewing the data.”

“Yes!” Zack cheered excitedly. “Yeah, let’s do that! Please?”

Sephiroth softened, and then relented. “Alright. Ready yourself. The goal is a hundred points.”

“Yes, sir!” Zack beamed, getting into position.

The game went better than either of them expected—Zack was incredibly motivated to match his movements to Sephiroth’s direction, if only to set a new highscore. Sephiroth, in turn, took to assigning the points quite well, and was pleased when Zack quickly went from a couple seventy-point slip-ups to consistent scores in the low nineties. Zack did trip and fall on his face, at one point, but Sephiroth hadn’t seen a need to rate that attempt.

After all, his amused smirk said enough.

Nearly a month later, Zack heard Angeal had returned. With no word from Sephiroth about their discussion, Zack decided to go see Angeal himself. After all, he wasn’t busy, and he might be able to nudge the conversation about his new training along.

So, Zack went to bug Angeal, following Kunsel’s intel on where the First was last seen—one of the general-purpose meeting rooms, for staff.

On the conference floor, Zack searched the windows of the meeting rooms, and quickly spotted his mentor. Angeal’s back was to the window as he spoke to someone, but whatever they were discussing couldn’t take too long. With that in mind, Zack headed over.

The door, he discovered, was slightly ajar, and his enhanced hearing picked up the other occupant’s voice.

“What good does further increasing his levels do?” Sephiroth asked, a low, irritated tone in his words.

“I don’t appreciate you telling me how to train *my* student,” Angeal snapped back.

They’re arguing…about me? Zack put together, freezing in place. It certainly didn’t *sound* like a conversation he should be interrupting. Zack moved into the conference room next to theirs, ducking out of view so he wouldn’t be caught eavesdropping.

“Then explain why you’re neglecting his fundamentals,” Sephiroth continued. “As-is, they aren’t enough to support the power increase from a First Class mako dose.”

“Even you can’t deny that Zack is a special case,” Angeal argued. “He’s a prodigy in his own right.”

“Being a *prodigy* won’t save him in real combat. He’s still inexperienced, and relying on luck, more than anything. Why aren’t you teaching him the skills he needs? Why was he still showing his back to the enemy as a *Second?*”

Angeal let out an aggravated sigh. “I’ve been accompanying him on lower tier missions, to set an example. He still has a lot to learn, I’ll admit, but—”

“Then he isn’t ready for First,” Sephiroth interrupted irritably. “The mistakes he’s making should have been trained out of him before his promotion to Second.”

Zack’s heart pounded as he listened, a flood of heat reaching all the way to his ears as Sephiroth tore into his abilities. It hurt, hearing it stated so plainly, even if Zack couldn’t exactly disagree—Based on what he’d been learning with Sephiroth, he had plenty of bad habits. Made a *lot* of mistakes. Ones he probably shouldn’t be making at all, but he’d gotten so far by coasting through the ranks on his strength alone, he hadn’t thought much of it. Angeal hadn’t seen a problem, either…

…yet, Zack also couldn’t deny he was seeing *results*, taking Sephiroth’s advice.

The silence stretched, and it wasn’t until Angeal muttered something under his breath that Zack realized the man had taken a total pause. “All I needed,” Angeal said lowly, “was for you to get his levels up, not dig your heels into issues that aren’t your responsibility.”

“They’re *yours*, as his mentor,” Sephiroth countered, his own words clipped with mounting anger. “Yet you’re pushing him through the ranks without adequately preparing him.”

Again, Angeal paused, and Zack wondered if maybe he was beginning to see Sephiroth’s point. If, maybe, he realized it probably *was* better to hold off on that promotion, much as Zack hated to admit it. Zack’s fist clenched where he crouched, conflicted. On the one hand, he wanted to be a First, more than anything—it would help him be a

hero, in the long run. On the other…did he necessarily *have* to be a First, to be a hero?

Plus, getting horribly injured—or worse—because he made some stupid mistake, would end that dream before he even realized it.

“I think asking you to train Zack was a mistake, on my part,” Angeal suddenly announced.

“*What?*” Zack whispered, at the same time Sephiroth snarled the word.

“What is all this about, Sephiroth?” Angeal questioned. “Supernova? Is that why you’re taking all this so personally?”

“I am not taking this—”

“I realize you disagree with my methods,” Angeal stated, cutting Sephiroth’s protest short. “However, this isn’t my first time training recruits. I know what I’m doing.”

“You’ll get him *killed*, sticking to your typical methods,” Sephiroth snapped. “He’ll destroy himself.”

“Listen,” Angeal said, in the tone that meant he was out of patience, in Zack’s experience. “These worries come up when dealing with your first student. It’s a learning curve. But, you were the last person I expected to let your emotions get the better of you, like this.”

“*Angeal*—” Sephiroth growled.

“Leave Zack’s training to me. He’s not like you,” Angeal stated. “We can’t all be as perfect as the great *Sephiroth.*”

Zack felt a pit in his stomach, the silence from the conference room deafening.

Eventually, Sephiroth spoke again, his voice so soft Zack barely heard it, but the icy tone felt all the more dangerous. “Don’t come to me for *sympathy* if he gets overwhelmed and *breaks*,” he hissed.

Then, the door opened, and Zack watched Sephiroth storm out of the conference room.

Zack remained crouched where he was, his mind reeling. *What the hell is going on?* he thought wildly, baffled at Angeal’s complete refusal to hear Sephiroth out. All of Sephiroth’s concerns just got brushed to the

side, with all the topic changes. And Sephiroth—Zack had never heard him so *angry* before. Staring sightlessly down at the carpeted floor, Zack tried to wrap his brain around where they could possibly go from here.

He could hear Angeal speaking with someone on his PHS, too quiet to listen to, and Zack couldn't bring himself to care.

Angeal was convinced Zack would manage, but Sephiroth was still right—Zack's luck, which he *did* rely on, could run out. All it would take was one flub. One monster he hadn't properly killed, striking him before he could counter. Meanwhile, Angeal kept telling him to 'carry himself like a First,' whatever that meant. Zack could pick up battle tactics easily. Could use materia in ways his peers hadn't conceived of. He could power his way through hordes of monsters, by force of will, alone, but none of that felt like it came close to the 'discipline' Angeal kept harping on him about.

Supposedly, everything would come with practice, but Zack didn't *know* how to practice it, and Sephiroth—

Zack's head snapped up, as he was knocked out of his miserable musings with one terrible realization: Angeal told Sephiroth to stop training Zack, entirely. He pushed himself up, and looked around the open area of the conference floor. Sephiroth was nowhere in sight.

Sephiroth was angry for his sake. Had been training him, teaching him, specifically to keep himself *safe*. Zack had felt so much more confident during those lessons, like he was actually learning usable skills. Could see the improvements, almost immediately. And now, all hope of that improvement could be gone.

Zack bolted out of the conference room in a panic, heading for the elevator, bypassing some very alarmed employees in his haste. When he reached the edge of the floor, he saw both elevators were in use, both in the process of descending. Unsure which one Sephiroth might have taken, he turned to a smartly dressed man who was waiting for the elevator to return. "Hey, did you see Sephiroth?" he asked hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, I did!" the man replied, like the sighting had been the most exciting part of his workday so far. Then, noticing Zack's uniform, added, "Ah, SOLDIER—Are you looking for him? He took the stairs."

"Thanks!" Zack blurted out, before turning and dashing for the stairwell.

Barreling through the door, Zack looked around. He still didn't see Sephiroth, even after peering over the railing, and trying to spot him through the spaces between each stair. Listening, though, he heard the sound of footsteps on the metal, going down. "Sephiroth!" he called out, racing down the steps.

"Zack…?" he heard Sephiroth reply from below.

"Wait up!" Zack demanded, rushing down the next two flights to reach him. When he rounded the third, he saw Sephiroth standing by the door to the sixty-second floor.

"What is it?" Sephiroth questioned, his anger from earlier replaced with clear concern at Zack's hurry.

"I…" Zack hesitated, bracing himself on the railing as he caught his breath. He hadn't actually planned what to say. Only panicked. A fact that he was regretting, now, as he awkwardly admitted, "I overheard…some of that talk, just now."

Sephiroth's eyes widened, marginally, and then he dropped his gaze, bangs falling across his face. "...I see," he uttered, lingering anger reigniting, as he hissed the words through grit teeth.

Zack's chest tightened, along with his grip on the railing. "Do you…" he trailed off, worries and fears for his future jumbling his words together in his head. "Do you really think I'm gonna break?"

Sephiroth didn't respond.

Zack waited, betting all his hopes on being right about Sephiroth's quirks—that Sephiroth just needed time to gather his thoughts, rather than the silence implying the worst.

"There is a great amount of pressure that comes with First Class," Sephiroth explained. "Not just in battle, but within the Company as a whole." He looked up at Zack then, calmer now. "You may surprise me with how well you handle it, but it remains a possibility."

Not a definite 'no,' but not a 'yes,' either. Just a possibility. One that Zack could, theoretically, change in his favor. Still, Zack found it difficult to meet Sephiroth's eyes, disappointed with the knowledge that he wasn't ready for promotion.

…even though Angeal, apparently, was pushing for it.

Zack rubbed the back of his neck, still confused as to why Angeal had brushed Sephiroth's concerns off so completely. If anyone understood what being First Class was like, it was SOLDIER's poster boy. Yet, Angeal didn't want Sephiroth subbing for him anymore, even though Zack needed help with Supernova.

Sephiroth watched him, quietly, as though waiting for Zack to gather his words, in turn.

"You won't…You're not gonna stop training me, are you?" Zack asked worriedly.

Looking away again, Sephiroth crossed his arms over his chest. "I doubt Angeal would ask it of me, at this stage." Zack caught sight of a grimace, obscured by strands of silver. "He doesn't want my *jadedness* to rub off on you."

"So what?" Zack countered petulantly, growing irritated that Angeal took that decision out of his hands. What was Zack supposed to do if he never figured it out Supernova? If his limit break never properly mirrored the man it represented? He glowered, as Sephiroth looked back at him with surprise. "Then, don't do it for Angeal," Zack demanded. "Do *you* want to?"

Sephiroth's surprise softened. "I do," he stated. "Your abilities are undeniable. I would be remiss in my own duties if I didn't provide you with support, as your senior."

Zack slowly descended the stairs, half-laughing at the statement. "I can't tell if you want to because it's your duty, or if you actually like training me."

"The latter," Sephiroth clarified, expression warming into a now-familiar smile.

Zack stopped on the last stair, smiling back. "It…uh," he began, still feeling raw from the earlier conversation. "It did kinda hurt to hear all that stuff about not being good enough for First, yet. Even if you've got a point."

"My apologies," Sephiroth said seriously, inclining his head. "It isn't my intention to hurt you."

"I know," Zack told him, genuinely, but still feeling infinitely better having it confirmed. "I could tell—You sounded more pissed off *for* me, than at me."

“I was. You have a great deal of promise, as an operative,” Sephiroth stated. “That being said, it isn’t your responsibility to figure out everything to do with SOLDIER on your own.”

“Lucky I’ve got you, then,” Zack grinned. “Besides, Supernova’s still wonky. I’m gonna need you for that, too.”

Sephiroth nodded, and then grew thoughtful. “I should discuss that with Angeal, but…some other time, perhaps.”

“…or, I could talk to him?” Zack offered. Then, unsure if his word would be all that effective, second-guessed himself. After all, Sephiroth and Angeal had probably known each other longer—

“That may go over better,” Sephiroth agreed, to Zack’s surprise.

Zack studied the First before him, noting Sephiroth had that same air of *down* he had while training Zack. “You guys aren’t really seeing eye-to-eye, huh?” he guessed, thinking back to the barely-suppressed anger in both men’s voices.

“…not as of late, no,” Sephiroth confessed. “Your training isn’t the only reason.”

The knowledge made Zack feel a little better about his own circumstances, but worse for Sephiroth. And Angeal, too, though Zack had expected Angeal to be a bit more understanding than he seemed earlier. He frowned, wondering how he could help the situation.

Sephiroth’s head canted, his eyes looking far off, as he mused. “…regardless, Angeal and I will find a workaround,” he declared. “At least to ensure our next mission goes smoothly.”

“You’ve got a joint mission?” Zack concluded. At Sephiroth’s nod, Zack grew all the more determined to talk to his mentor, and soon.

“Different units, but, yes.”

Zack leaned against the wall, trying to formulate a plan now that he felt better. “Where are you guys headed?” he inquired, wondering if he could squeeze in a quick chat with Angeal beforehand. Or at least question him about what the hell had driven such a wedge between the two Firsts.

Sephiroth, for his part, glanced around the stairwell, possibly for eavesdroppers. This was, technically, probably not information Zack

was supposed to know. Yet, lowering his voice, Sephiroth revealed, “We’re going to Fort Tamblin, in Wutai.”

Worries in Wutai

Chapter Summary

> Zack goes to speak with Angeal about his limit break, only to find out he has higher priorities now -- Namely, a mission to Fort Tamblin, in Wutai.

Chapter Notes

> Hello! RIP to that once a month schedule I joked about just before RH completely consumed me lmfao This fic ended up becoming a lot more than I initially anticipated, and I wanted to make sure I had enough time to actually execute it. So, as a result, I am working on making a big enough buffer to get this fic on a schedule, hopefully by the end of this year. I also updated the tags/removed the Angeal tag because this is going to be a Nibelheim fix-it specifically, not an Everything fix-it, so if you're here hoping Gen and Angeal get a happy ending I, uh…I got bad news LOL (as with RH, I am trying to keep them both as in-character as I can! It just so happens that the canon I'm covering makes them uh, assholes LMAO)
>
> Anyway, wanted to post this chapter at least to give people that heads up! I'll be making as much buffer as I can after this, and the plan is to get chapter 5 up no later than December (if I can convince myself to hold onto the buffer that long LOL)

After Sephiroth departed, Zack went back upstairs to find Angeal. With any luck, he would catch the man before his next mission whisked him away to Wutai. When Zack reached the conference floor again, he found Angeal immediately, his mentor waiting irritably by the elevators. As Zack approached, Angeal noticed him out of the corner of his eye—like Sephiroth, the anger bled away at the sight of Zack, but Zack could tell Angeal was still ticked off from the tightness of his smile.

"Zack," Angeal greeted with a nod, all business, despite how long he was absent. "Good, I was just about to look for you. You're up."

"Up?" Zack echoed, frowning confusedly as he reached Angeal's side, just in time for the elevator to hit their floor.

"New mission," Angeal explained mysteriously, a teasing smile on his

face as he nodded to the opening doors, directing Zack to enter. “It’ll be your show. We have to report to Director Lazard first, for a briefing.”

“Wait, really?!” Zack exclaimed excitedly. After so long waiting for instruction, just to wind up continuing training, the thought that he might *finally* be able to get out there and test his abilities—

…was exactly what Sephiroth was worried about.

Zack faltered as Angeal entered the elevator with him, his mentor chuckling fondly while pressing the button for the SOLDIER Floor. “I know it’s boring to be stuck doing modules for so long. Figured it was about time to show the Director what you’re made of.”

And Sephiroth disagreed, Zack realized, wondering if the disagreement was what had incited the earlier argument between the two Firsts. What’s more, Angeal’s comment about the training being boring was only partially true—Sure, Zack would prefer to be fighting real monsters. Get out into the open world. Do some good. Yet, his thoughts drifted to the precision training Sephiroth coached him through—how satisfying it was looking back at his old data, and seeing the improvement. The consistency in his progress. If anything, it proved there were ways he could do that necessary training *without* being bored out of his skull—

“Are you so excited that you’ve been left speechless?” Angeal joked suddenly, the words interrupting Zack’s musings.

“A—No, I’m—” Zack spluttered, unsure how to explain. “It’s just, I was talking to Sephiroth—”

“Don’t worry about what Sephiroth says,” Angeal stated gently.

But, while the words were clearly an attempt at being reassuring, Angeal’s own self-assuredness brought Zack no comfort this time. Not with the earlier fight still fresh in his mind.

“Just do your best,” Angeal emphasized. “Lazard will make the final decision.”

Zack tried to mirror Angeal’s smile, but it fell quickly to his uneasiness. His eyes flicked to the floor number display as they ascended, wondering just how this briefing was going to go—He received orders from the Director via email, of course. Gotten the SOLDIER-wide stuff. Never met the guy in person, though.

Surely a man in the Director's seat would know best for a situation like Zack's, but Lazard didn't *know* Zack. Not personally. Not his quirks. Zack might end up spending half the meeting just trying to explain them all—convincing Lazard that he could definitely handle his current rank, and then some, despite some of Zack's own, newly concerning doubts.

All too soon, they arrived at the SOLDIER Floor.

It was only once they made it to the actual Briefing Room that Zack recalled the original reason he wanted to speak with Angeal, so distracted by all these new developments. His chance to do so slipped away, just as the door slid open and Angeal walked inside. Zack followed suit, frustratedly, flexing his fingers in irritation and making a mental note to pull Angeal aside once this meeting was over.

When they entered, Zack spotted a smartly dressed blond man, who had to be the Director, turn in his seat to greet them. "Angeal," Lazard acknowledged, peering appraisingly, but not unkindly at the pair, "and, this must be Zack."

"Director," Angeal saluted.

"Sir," Zack acknowledged, saluting in turn.

Lazard smiled. "At ease," he said, gesturing to a chair.

Angeal took a seat, but Zack remained standing, feeling oddly uncomfortable. He wasn't sure if it was simply his nerves, leftover from his conversation with Sephiroth, or because he was meeting the Director of SOLDIER. Though, Lazard seemed nice enough. If anything, the formal, elegant emails Zack remembered receiving from him certainly matched this man, dressed in his finely tailored blazer. There was just something…stiff about him. Something Zack couldn't quite get a read on, but he brushed off the feeling as Lazard stood up, extending his hand to shake Zack's.

"It's good to finally meet face to face. Lazard, Director of SOLDIER," Lazard introduced.

Zack shook his hand with a smile. "Heya."

Lazard's grip was firm, but politely so, as professional as Zack had imagined him to be. The Director soon sat back down, turning to the monitor on the desk. "On to business," he said, pressing a button.

Along the far wall, the projector came to life, displaying the profile of a brown-haired, First Class SOLDIER, with the letters “M. I. A.” stamped in red across his photo.

“SOLDIER First Class, Genesis,” Lazard began grimly. “A month ago, he went missing during a mission to Wutai. Know anything about this?”

Zack stared at the photo. The name was familiar, but only vaguely so —most everything he heard about a First named ‘Genesis’ was that the guy was an introvert. Not someone who showed his face much. But, there weren’t many Firsts to begin with. For the man to have disappeared on a mission, it should have been a *huge* deal, and yet Zack hadn’t heard a peep until now. Even Sephiroth hadn’t mentioned —

But, as Zack thought of it, he remembered Sephiroth *did* mention another First, once.

“A sparring match, with another First,” Sephiroth explained softly. “Things got…out of hand.”

Zack’s eyes narrowed at Genesis’s face. *Does this guy have something to do with—?* he thought, only to catch Angeal’s bowed head turn to look curiously in his direction. The movement hurtled Zack back to the present moment, where the Director was still waiting on an answer. “Not a clue!” Zack blurted out hastily. He was making assumptions, anyway—maybe there was some other First Sephiroth could have fought with.

“The mission is currently stuck in limbo. That’s why we’ve decided to send you,” Lazard elaborated.

“Uh, to Wutai?” Zack questioned. A *First Class* mission, for a Second? Wutai was still a warzone, despite the recent attempts for peace. Still required *Sephiroth.* And Angeal. It was one hell of a mission just to show the Director ‘what he was made of.’

“Yes,” Lazard confirmed, bringing his clasped hands up to rest on the table. “This war has gone on long enough.”

“I’ve recommended you for First,” Angeal cut in.

Zack’s eyes went wide, and he stared at his mentor in shock. He withdrew his earlier assessment—*this* must have been why Sephiroth was so upset. This mission wasn’t just to introduce Zack to the

Director. It was a rank test. One Sephiroth didn't think Zack was ready to take on.

One that Zack, increasingly, worried really *was* happening too fast.

Angeal frowned at him, suspicious at Zack's silence. "...are you alright, Zack?" he asked. "I thought you'd be happier."

Zack quickly flashed a grin at his mentor, even if it was forced. Angeal must have talked Zack up quite a bit to get the Director to agree. It was an *enormous* favor. "Y-Yeah! I—Thank you, Angeal! Seriously, you're the best!" Zack managed, pumping his fists and hoping it came off as enthusiastic as was expected of him. Becoming a First was a step toward his dream, after all, and now it was put right within his reach. All he had to do was grab it.

…it felt *too* easy.

"Make sure you take this mission seriously, understand?" Angeal told him, his expression amused enough that Zack was sure he nailed the exuberant act.

"Yes, sir!" Zack jumped to attention, still grinning, outwardly. "Very serious."

Inwardly, he wasn't sure how much more seriousness he could take.

Zack sat in the transport helicopter, grimacing sourly at his boots. The mission itself was simple enough: Get as close to Fort Tamblin as possible, without alerting the Wutai soldiers stationed there. Wait for the signal from B Unit—*Sephiroth's* Unit—and then wreak havoc. Easy. Zack's specialty. They would win the war with this. He would be world renowned for the effort—a *hero*, like he always dreamed.

And yet, the Director's final, amused statement after learning about Zack's goals repeated in his mind on loop: *Unattainable dreams are the best kind.*

Zack's leg bounced faster as time dragged on. It wasn't the enemy he was worried about. A SOLDIER Second could easily go toe to toe with a non-enhanced soldier. But this test—him becoming a First, so fast—

It *was* what he wanted…right?

"Sir, we've reached the drop point," announced the Security Officer

piloting their helicopter.

Zack looked up, just as the transport began to descend. He meant to ask Angeal *so* many things at this point, and all he was doing was getting lost in thought, over and over again. "*Dammit*," Zack hissed under his breath.

Angeal, though, with his First Class hearing, smiled teasingly in his direction. "Don't tell me you're letting your nerves get the best of you already."

"I'm fine!" Zack insisted, even as his stomach swooped. The helicopter touched down, and Zack told himself it would all be fine. He was fine. *More* than fine. He was the best SOLDIER Second Shinra had, and he was going to make the best First. Next to Sephiroth, anyway.

Though, that comparison only led him to wonder just how much he would still have to lean on his seniors as a First, too.

Angeal opened the door, and then with a determined nod to Zack said, "Time to move."

Zack steeled himself, heading out of the helicopter, swearing to himself that the buzzing beneath his skin was just excitement, nothing more. He would work it off on the trek to the fort. In fact, the extra adrenaline might even be good for all the fighting coming up.

Luckily in line with his new strategy, Angeal set a speedy pace. The two of them sprinted through the woods, mako-enhanced eyes and moonlight making the path startlingly clear. Before long, they were deep in the Wutaian wilderness, well away from any assistance beyond each other.

Zack trailed just after Angeal, eyeing the Buster Sword uneasily. How much longer would he be able to rely on Angeal like this? How much longer until he was expected to handle *everything* about SOLDIER on his own?

Eventually, Angeal stopped, right as the path began to slope gently downhill. "Fort Tamblin is straight ahead," he stated. His face was grim as he met Zack's gaze, the man wholly focused on the mission at hand. "Let's go. B Unit is already standing by."

The words were barely out of his mentor's mouth when Zack heard footsteps rapidly approaching, and then—

“You two there! Hold it!”

A trio of Wutai soldiers emerged from further down the path, gun-lances drawn and prepared for battle.

Angeal lowered himself into a ready stance of his own, but didn’t rush, even as the soldiers charged them. He merely braced himself, as if prompting Zack to remember what this mission was for.

It’ll be your show, he said.

Zack stepped toward the oncoming enemy, drawing his own weapon and feigning confidence he didn’t feel, as he said, “Okay then, leave this to me!”

It wasn’t like fighting VR enemies, that was for sure, but the difference was negligible to Zack. He fought other operatives before, for training. It was an easy dance. A quick parry and slice here, a kick to the ribs there, and one of the privates was already on the ground. A dodge, as the second private stabbed at him, a brief roll through the dirt, and then Zack was up again, ready to blast the floundering man with Fire.

The first private was up too, and countered with a round of bullets. They missed, mostly, but the ones that did hit Zack grazed across his arm. Seeing his attack was ineffective, the private charged again, aiming a slash at Zack’s neck.

Zack blocked, noting the injuries from the bullets didn’t hurt at all—in fact, even as he miscalculated a step, and the third of the Wutai soldiers sliced across his forearm, there was no pain. After a spinning slash of his own to get the trio of enemies to back up, Zack glanced at the appendage only to find there was no mark there whatsoever.

The no physical damage buff, Zack realized.

One of the soldiers fired a shot past him, in Angeal’s direction, but the First was nowhere to be seen when Zack checked. The trio’s efforts refocused, all surrounding Zack alone. All raising their weapons, to fire in unison.

Before they could pull the trigger, Zack ducked low, dashing close and stabbing the nearest. The man’s breath left his lungs in a pained grunt, and then Zack was onto the second private. He recklessly rushed the soldier, slashing in heavy, solid strikes, with no care for where the other man’s weapon ended up. The gun-lance was finally slammed from the soldier’s hands, flying off to the side as Zack dealt another

slash across the man's torso.

The third private shot at him, the bullets whizzing past Zack's ear as he ran right for his next target. "Stay back!" the man shouted. "You *mon—!*"

His cry was cut short as Zack leapt over him, landing just behind the private and immediately jabbing his own weapon backward.

The blade cut right through the soldier's back, and he crumpled to his knees, falling to the ground as he slid off of Zack's sword.

"Alright, *next!*" Zack called out, sword poised to go on the attack again.

"Calm down, Zack," Angeal chastised, walking out from behind a bit of brush.

Zack scoffed, unable to help himself. "No can do," he retorted irritably, even as he eased up on his stance. He glanced around the trees, searching for signs of Lazard. "The Director is watching, right?" Zack asked. Lazard would have seen a stunning battle, with Zack single-handedly evading injury, despite being so directly in the line of fire. Zack's empty fist clenched at the thought, as he returned his sword to his back. From the outside, Zack managed flawlessly.

From the inside, having now noticed just how much his limit's buffs assisted him, it was impossible for him to ignore how truly *lucky* he was.

Angeal moved a few paces ahead of him. "Zack," he began slowly, his back to his protege. "...Heard of dumbapples?"

The absurdity of the question gave Zack pause. Almost enough to calm his adrenaline-fueled, rapidly beating heart. He wracked his brain, coming up short on any such fruit. Or monster—Was it a monster? Hell if he knew. "...No, what's that?"

Angeal brought a hand to his chin, muttering to himself. "Incredible…" Then, in a louder voice, still speaking strangely slow, he asked, "You really don't know?"

Staying silent, Zack had the distinct impression he was missing something. What did apples have to do with the mission at hand? There weren't even any fruit on the trees around them.

Suddenly, Angeal was walking, nonchalant. “Well,” he said, almost chipper, “so much for you making First.”

“Wh—?!” Zack spluttered, completely baffled by the turn of events. Apples. *Apples?* Apples couldn’t seriously be that important to SOLDIER. Sephiroth would have mentioned it if they were—

Though, Sephiroth also meant to mention Zack’s limit break to Angeal. As did Zack. Preferably *before* they ran into Sephiroth again.

“Angeal!” Zack yelled, running out of time, and after his mentor. “Wait up!” By the time Zack caught up, Angeal had blatantly slowed his gait, wearing an expectant smile when Zack reached him. Zack hesitated, briefly, knowing Sephiroth would be a sore subject, all things considered, but if he didn’t talk about his limit break right this second, he would forget again. Not willing to risk yet another string of long missions keeping them from having the conversation, Zack started awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “About me becoming First—I think…I think Sephiroth might have a point about my basics.”

The smile on Angeal’s face dropped faster than Zack could blink, and Angeal immediately turned back to the path. “I’m not sure *now* is the best time to be having doubts, Zack,” he responded, his voice clipped as he continued walking.

Zack grimaced, jogging after him, persistent. “Look, I know you guys are having issues, but he—”

“What do you mean you *know?*” Angeal suddenly rounded on him, shocked and angry all at once.

Startled, Zack fell back a step. He knew he was going to have to tread carefully for this conversation, but normally Angeal was so level-headed. He didn’t expect a reaction so…*intense.* “I mean…it’s kinda obvious. Sephiroth’s been upset for weeks,” Zack explained, frustration mounting as Angeal continued to glower. “What’s with you man? He’s just trying to help!”

Angeal let out a sharp sigh, leading into a long, silent pause. “...it’s complicated,” he finally said. Indicating a low, stone wall among the treeline, he added, “Let’s focus on the mission. What’s going on between me and Sephiroth is…personal. It’s not relevant.”

Following, Zack didn’t let up, growing gradually more irritated with the question dodging. “And *apples* are mission-relevant?” he griped. “Look, I overheard you guys arguing about me.”

“So, *that’s* what this is about…” Angeal groused.

“He’s right that I can’t rely on luck forever,” Zack pointed out. “My limit break—we figured out it’s a whole *system*. It affects everything! My level, my focus, status effects—*everything!* I can’t just keep relying on you guys and hope my limit picks up the slack!” he rambled, the fears and mission nerves all colliding into a tumble of worried words, spilling out of his mouth faster than he could stop them. “I mean, even *this* mission—What happens if I just get lucky and impress Lazard so much that he promotes me right away? What do I do on First Class missions when you’re not—”

Angeal held a hand up, giving Zack a stern, but patient look to silence him. Upon reaching the wall, Angeal led him to a broken section, from which they could see brightly lit, pagoda-style towers lining Fort Tamblin’s defenses. Angeal crouched, waving for Zack to do the same.

Zack did, begrudgingly, staring intensely back at Angeal until his mentor finally deigned to give him a straight answer.

“You’re a talented operative, Zack,” Angeal said quietly. Seriously, as he looked Zack in the eye. “All these fears—they’re normal. You don’t have to worry.” He softened, sympathetic fondness in his expression as he regarded Zack. “Anything you haven’t picked up yet, you will. Don’t overthink it.” He leaned forward, one arm resting on a knee, as though trying to truly drive the point home by getting more into Zack’s space. “All you have to do is maintain your honor, as a SOLDIER. As long as you do that, everything else will fall into place.”

While the minor speech was a slight comfort, Zack stared openly back at his mentor, feeling like not a single one of his questions were addressed. “...and, what Sephiroth said? About basics I should’ve learned *before* making Second? Am I gonna figure that out with just *honor*, too?”

Backing off, Angeal resituated himself to observe the fort. He was quiet for a moment. Frowning again. “...Sephiroth may not be the best example, in that regard.”

“*Huh?*” Zack exclaimed, in complete disbelief of what he just heard. “What do you—?!”

“He can get too focused on the little things, at times,” Angeal explained, a thread of frustration strung through his voice. “...to the point that he can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“He’s trying to make sure I can handle things on my own,” Zack countered, uncomprehending.

“Yes,” Angeal agreed, his eyes flicking to Zack briefly as he thought back on something. Something that made the line of his shoulders that much more tense, before he resumed watching Fort Tamblin. “He’s been through a lot, Zack. It’s made him…jaded, in a way, toward SOLDIER.”

Zack’s heart clenched as he recalled his talk with Sephiroth after the argument—recalled Sephiroth so upset, angry, explaining that Angeal didn’t want his jadedness rubbing off on Zack. Zack thought he was exaggerating whatever Angeal must have said during that fight.

Now, Zack realized Sephiroth was *quoting* him.

Angeal shook his head, solemn. “I don’t want to say he’s lost sight of the bigger picture, but—”

His words were lost as a loud, bright explosion roared through the trees—the signal from Sephiroth’s unit.

“You know the plan?” Angeal asked, confirming.

Zack swallowed—both his nerves, and his follow-up questions. He removed his sword from his back, preparing himself to make a run for the fort. “...Ready,” he told Angeal.

“Begin mission.”

Formidable Forts

Chapter Summary

> Zack fights his way through Fort Tamblin, paying close attention to how his limit system fares during a First Class mission.

Chapter Notes

> Happy December everyone! Life really did its best trying to kick my ass this year, but I still managed to make enough buffer that I'm comfortable putting this fic on a three week schedule! From now on I'll have the next update date in the fic summary. If anything changes with the schedule, I'll be sure to say so in both the notes here and also on my tumblr :D
>
> Definitely a lot heavier on the inclusion of canon stuff in this chapter, so I've skipped around/summarized where I could, unless it serves the narrative (so, in short, skipped Yuffie even though Zack does meet her in this chapter. Just way too much canon dialogue that I couldn't see any reason to alter, so we skip lol). Hope it's still entertaining despite that, and that y'all enjoy!

"It's just one man!" yelled the Wutai soldier.

Zack wondered if they used to say that about Sephiroth, too. It was quick work to cut down all the soldiers at the gate. A surge of strength from his limit break gave him a string of Blizzards, at no cost to his mana, and even the guards up top fell under the assault. Zack didn't waste any time—other soldiers would head to the entrance after all that racket, and he needed to draw more attention inside. He ran at the wall, using SOLDIER strength and a bit of help from one of the banners hanging from the side to propel himself up to the parapets.

At the top, Zack could hear a sergeant barking orders to open the gate, to see what the hell was going on outside. Before he could be spotted, Zack sped to the next gate over. The broader the area he ran amok, the better.

The guards at the second gate were none the wiser, until Zack jumped right in front of them.

These soldiers, likewise, went down without much effort. From there, Zack headed further into the fort. The mission was shaping up to be

exactly as easy as Zack told himself it would be.

A brief check-in with Angeal informed Zack that there were 'anti-SOLDIER monsters' somewhere within Fort Tamblin, but the most he was running across were Foulanders—hideous, red-faced beasts with long tusks and lolling green tongues. They blasted Zack with bursts of Fire, prompting him to discover a solid strike of Blizzard wiped them out in one go. So, Zack simply continued on through the winding corridor, through spinning walls marked by torchlight and stone Foulander faces.

He was being reckless, he knew, but now that he was so hyper-aware of all his buffs, he almost *needed* to test the limits of his system, to see where and when it might fall short.

He started triggering traps on purpose, as soon as he found them—the moving walls, for one. A blatantly suspicious chest in the middle of the path, for another. By the time the sergeants in the watchtowers joined the fray, Zack had been hit a fair amount, but the damage was hardly worth wasting a potion on. Even the ethers he packed weren't necessary. Soldier after soldier fell to his sword, and when Zack's limit break finally hit a Rush Assault, he wondered why he worried at all.

A trio of Foulanders collapsed before him, taken out by easy, no cost magic. Zack found himself at another large gate, but it seemed to lead further into the depths of the fort, rather than outside. Just as he nicked a nearby supply chest—no sense in wasting his own, after all—his PHS rang.

"*Zack, nicely done. We have successfully occupied the fort,"* Lazard told him. "*I just needed you to keep their attention, but…*" he continued, a pleased smile in his voice, "*…Impressive. You did well. Keep pressing forward.*"

Angeal and Sephiroth must have been doing fine, if the fort was officially occupied. Zack smiled as he hung up, feeling lighter now that he was able to actually get into the action. Maybe he really *would* be able to handle being a First, even when Angeal moved on to training new recruits. Sure, Zack was getting lucky with the lack of mana cost, but he didn't really *need* that boost, did he? The fights were a breeze, even without his limit system's help.

It was with this in mind that he pushed open the gate, and stepped out into a massive courtyard.

"That must be the central area," Zack muttered to himself, eyeing the

gigantic statues of angry gods situated on either side of a circular building. The roof of it towered high, changing into the more familiar pagoda-style as it rose.

No sooner had he noted that the main floor was reminiscent of an arena, than he heard the growls of another Foulander. He turned, and another Wutai sergeant was with the beast—an obvious sign he had his work cut out for him if he wanted to clear this area, too. Both man and monster were easily dispatched, just like the others, and Zack continued cutting his way down to the courtyard as more showed up.

The fights were beginning to wear on him. Just a little. Not as much as he feared, thanks to his enhancements, but noticeable enough that Zack decided to take a break, once there were no enemies in sight. He paused at a fountain that faced the arena, using a potion while he eyed the serpent statue sitting among spouts of water.

There was a large, stone monument in front of it, with writing in a script Zack wasn't familiar with. The monument, and the serpent, were both gilded with fine lines of gold, the metal accenting edges and flared fins. The serpent, Zack noted, was depicted snarling, carrying a glimmering blue orb in its mouth.

"What's this?" Zack couldn't help but question, getting the sense that the statue was very much important, but with no context as to why.

Suddenly, a gruff voice from behind him answered, "That is Wutai's guardian deity, the great Leviathan."

Zack whirled around, finding himself surrounded by four Wutai soldiers—experts, clearly, being able to sneak up on someone with enhanced hearing so easily. Their uniforms were starkly different colors from the sergeants and privates he fought before, the group all wearing a deep gray with a fancy, moon-shaped emblem embroidered onto their pants. Though they shared Zack's wariness, they strangely didn't raise their weapons, merely holding their massive gun-lances at their sides.

The soldier furthest from him stood tall, and proud—their leader, Zack figured—and said, "We are the Wutai army's elite, the Crescent. We serve Leviathan, and smite Wutai's enemies." He tipped his helmeted head at Zack, curious, yet Zack could hear the barely restrained anger in his voice. "SOLDIER of Shinra, a query: is the goal of this invasion to spread your mako reactors?"

"Yes, a mako reactor here…would allow people to live better lives,"

Zack answered haltingly, unsure why else Shinra would be so insistent on building one in Wutai. He was also unsure what exactly the issue was, with that goal. The Company wanted to bring the benefits of mako energy to everyone, after all. But, the Wutai soldier's—*captain*, Zack thought, *he must be*—phrasing unsettled him. As far as Zack knew, this mission was an 'invasion' only because Wutai kept attacking Shinra employees without hearing them out.

He wasn't expecting anyone to try *talking* to him on this mission.

"This 'better life' you speak of," the captain continued, the words taking on a sarcastic bite as he grew more enraged by the second. "...comes at the grave cost of losing our homeland. Pain and despair, *that's* what you bring!"

Zack flinched uneasily, disturbed. He was…he was trying to *help* people. Just like the Company. Just like *all* of SOLDIER—

But, even as he thought that, Angeal's comment about Sephiroth's *jadedness* regarding the program rattled around his brain.

The captain, cooling only slightly at Zack's silence, spoke again. "One more question. You have power, so I must ask." He stepped forward, shouting through his mask, "Why do you use it to cause *evil?!*"

Is this why Sephiroth's 'jaded?' Zack wondered. Was it common to get asked such an insane question? Did Sephiroth have people wielding weapons at him all the time, claiming that simply trying to do his job and help people was *evil?*

Did Angeal deal with it too? Was he okay with what they were doing for the Company? Why would the Wutaians even say such a thing if something wasn't…wrong?

"Does it bring you joy," the captain hissed, "to torture innocent people?"

"That's not what I…" Zack trailed off lamely, baffled at the conversation. He wasn't *torturing*. He was resolving a conflict. He was helping pave the way for people to have access to massive energy sources—for *peace*, and lifestyles that were otherwise unthinkably out of reach.

That was supposed to be a *good* thing.

"Is it wrong to spread happiness through mako energy?" Zack

countered, indignant. “Is that what you consider evil?”

“I thought we could reason with each other as warriors. But sadly, I was mistaken,” the captain retorted scornfully. He drew his gun-lance up, aiming the weapon directly at Zack, as his fellows followed suit. “Then, let us settle things as warriors! Come forth!”

The Crescent, Zack found, were very different from the other Wutai soldiers he faced.

The captain moved first, charging, while the other three soldiers hung back. Swinging his lance, his weapon clanged against Zack’s, the two of them trading blow for blow. Yet, even as they parried each other, the other soldiers remained where they were.

Their tactic was reminiscent of another, quick battle in the fort, Zack thought—where a sergeant had been left to fend for himself by his underlings. Those soldiers ran, though, whereas these Crescent guys hovered close by, just out of range. Zack pushed forward, breaking through the captain’s guard and getting several lucky slashes in before he was countered again.

And then, right when he thought he had an opening to send the captain to the ground, two of the other soldiers attacked in tandem.

Zack flailed quickly backward to avoid getting skewered, only to end up slashed across his back by the fourth soldier. “*Shit—!*” Zack hissed, spinning in a rapid, deadly circle, creating some breathing room between himself and the Crescent Unit.

All two soon, a pair of the soldiers had their gun-lances up and aimed.

Darting through the group, nicked by stray bullets zipping past, Zack hoped the captain and the only other soldier would get caught in the crossfire. The Crescent Unit was too well trained for that, though, stopping short and reverting to charging with their blades, instead. Zack ended up right in front of the captain for his efforts, only managing to not get immediately stabbed by virtue of his last-second cast of Thunder. The final soldier slashed at him, but Zack unthinkingly slashed in response, his enhanced strength knocking the weapon from the other man’s grip.

Zack barely had time to assess the group, with how quickly the other two soldiers swarmed him.

His limit system was no help, either—it was working fine, until now.

It was definitely active—Zack could feel his brain buzzing with the adrenaline, but the lack of buffs instantly, chillingly reminded him of Sephiroth calling it a game of chance.

A game he was *losing*, his brain spinning and spinning, and landing on absolutely nothing.

Blocking an incoming overhead strike, Zack opted for the offensive again. He rushed at the group, attacking with wide, arcing slashes, catching multiple soldiers at once. They staggered, and Zack sensed a break—he only had to keep it up—

Then the fourth soldier slammed him in the side, the pole of his weapon sweeping under his arm and bashing his ribcage.

Zack stumbled from the impact, shakily holding his sword up to drive the captain's gun-lance away, inches from spearing him in the face. He didn't have enough time for a *Cure*, let alone to reorient himself—

Come on! Zack pleaded with his brain, panicked, and afraid that this was it—maybe this was *exactly* the situation Sephiroth thought would happen, and Angeal wasn't going to show up to save him—

Then, suddenly, he felt a surge of strength under his skin, and he activated Rush Assault before he even knew what it was.

His punches and kicks from that point on were a blur. After the limit break was through, Zack vaguely registered that two of the soldiers were down. Only the captain and one other soldier remained. Zack yelled as he ran at them, heedless of the soldier's lance slicing his arm as he came in close. He cleaved through the man's armor, sending him flying. Then, he rounded on the captain again.

"*Basta—!*" was as much as the captain could shout before Zack blasted him with Fire.

After a few moments of uninterrupted panting for air, Zack noticed the whole group was defeated. All on the ground. Attempting to charge another Fire, just in case, Zack found that all of the soldiers appeared to still be breathing.

Fortunately for him, none of them—-not even the captain—made a move to get up.

With the captain lying prone, Zack turned away, even if every bit of advice Sephiroth gave him was screaming at him for leaving his back

open to the enemy. Still, he couldn't bring himself to face the man, with his ragged breaths grating on Zack's ears. He was too rattled from his limit system failing him until that last second. Not to mention their conversation. Trying to talk things out beforehand didn't help. Zack wasn't sure kicking the guy's ass solved anything, either.

Everything was a *mess*.

"Why won't you finish me?" the captain questioned, rasping.

"I don't know," Zack lied, trying to keep his own tone light and glib, despite the anger and confusion and sick, uneasy feeling in his gut. These people were willing to die, just to stop him from…*helping*. This was so, unquestionably different from the module missions. From culling fiends.

Monsters didn't ask *why*.

"Not in the mood, I guess," Zack added quietly, his injuries stinging in the cool, night air.

"As long as we draw breath, we will oppose Shinra," the captain warned menacingly, hissing through grit teeth as his own wounds got the better of him. "I promise…one day, I will have your *head*."

Zack wondered how Sephiroth would handle this situation. How Angeal would. If they would kill the captain and remove the threat on their life, immediately. But, for Zack himself, something didn't sit right. Felt off. Felt inherently *more* evil, to kill this man, even if Zack couldn't find the words to explain it.

"...Fine," Zack accepted, not looking back as he walked away from the captain, and onward, toward the arena. "I'll be waiting."

One day, this action would bite him the ass, he knew. But he couldn't shake the feeling that the whole situation was *wrong*. That killing a man trying to defend his country, when there should be other options —*better* options. The guy *did* try to talk to Zack, after all, even if the whole conversation went south too quickly to be effective.

He risked a glance behind him, only to see that the captain, along with the other members of the Crescent Unit, had vanished.

Zack let out a soft sigh, sure he was going to be looking over his shoulder for a *while*, but the next breath came in a little easier, with less weight on his heart.

The door to the arena slammed shut behind Zack, and he stiffened himself back into alertness, even as he downed potions and ethers. The little girl he ran into just before coming in was, thankfully, nowhere to be seen. Hadn't followed him in. With any luck, after his excellent acting, she was convinced she thwarted the enemy, and went the hell *home*. It was too dangerous in this fort for a kid, with soldiers and monsters running amok.

Which, now that he thought about it, Zack realized he never did find those anti-SOLDIER fiends Angeal warned him about.

Walking deeper into the arena, Zack saw a large gong, and pillars that held up absurdly massive chains. Curiously, a set of the chains from each pillar led upward, to the roof. Zack followed their path with his eyes as he approached the center of the room. The chains were attached to hinges bolted into the ceiling, at the edges of a circular, metal plate.

Just as he was pondering over its purpose, the plate split into four sections, slamming open as huge, monstrous shapes tumbled right for him.

Zack dodged out of the way just in time to avoid getting squashed by the gigantic pair of fiends. They were almost humanoid in stature, despite their overlong arms and ghastly faces, both beasts adorned in different, Wutaian styled armor. The closest, in red, lifted its head to reveal glowing eyes and a maw full of sharp teeth. It lifted an oversized tomahawk, raising its arms in a roar, while its companion swung around a mace.

"You must be the anti-SOLDIER monsters!" Zack determined, readying his sword, and hoping *this* time, his limit system would cooperate. The space was small, so he didn't have much room to maneuver. He went for the green armored beast's unprotected areas on its legs, getting a few slices in before it slammed its tomahawk down. Zack dodged to the side, out of range.

Only to immediately be backhanded by the other beast's gigantic hand.

Knocked off his feet, Zack quickly rolled out of the way, before hopping back up and into action. He launched a Thunder at the red armored fiend, noting with disappointment that it merely shook itself at the magic, like it was only a shock of static. The other fiend, slowly lumbering in his direction, was missed entirely, despite its massive

size.

When the first fiend's mace went up, Zack braced himself with his sword, prepared to block the blow. The attack slammed into him, propelling him backward and into a pillar. Zack let out a grunt of pain, keenly reminded that the slashes from the Crescent Unit weren't *entirely* gone, before he spotted the tomahawk flying at him. Zack darted out of its way, successfully speeding behind the red armored beast, and then unleashed an onslaught of attacks on its back.

The beast howled in anger and pain, too slow to fully turn and face him.

Coming to its aid, the other fiend moved to slap him away. While Zack hardly had time to defend, he wasn't launched off his feet again. In fact, despite feeling the sting of the impact, Zack didn't so much as budge.

The endure buff? Zack wondered, relieved. So, something useful, this time. He ran to attack the red armored beast's back again, finding that it flinched far more there—a weak point he could exploit. While the monster spun around to whack at him again, the endure buff kept him upright.

It wouldn't last much longer, though.

Zack hurled a Fire at both monsters, hoping maybe one of them had some sort of elemental weakness. While the magic did sear their skin, they kept moving, undeterred. Suddenly, both beasts hefted their weapons above their heads, roaring in tandem, an odd glow forming on the steel.

Then, they both flung their weapons at him, mace and tomahawk cleaving through the air.

A sword wasn't remotely enough to block them both, Zack knew, but they flew too fast for him to dodge. The weapons crashed into him, ricocheting off his blade and smashing through one of the pillars, before magically swinging back to their owners. While the beasts roared again, though, Zack hesitated, momentarily baffled—he didn't feel the *slightest* sting of pain—

No physical damage, he realized, capitalizing on his limit system's help by rushing forward and slicing through the red armored beast's leg. It screeched in pain as it toppled, at the perfect angle for Zack to direct a stab right below its chin. His sword struck true, impaling the monster

through the jaw, deep enough that it spasmed. When Zack withdrew his weapon, the fiend fell flat on the floor, and went still.

The other fiend cried out, enraged, swiping at Zack with its hand.

Rolling under its arm, Zack maneuvered behind the beast and then slashed. Even when it managed to turn around, Zack kept up the assault, sure he could handle this now that it was just *one* enemy. The monster slammed its mace into Zack's body, and Zack felt the pain of it *plenty*, this time, his buff decidedly over. Even so, he took a swing at the fiend's forearm, sensing some other buff had to be active now.

His theory was proved correct when his sword sliced through skin and muscle like it was paper, steel scraping bone.

The critical blow severed enough of the limb that the monster's mace fell from its hand. Zack made short work of it, then, slashing savagely at every break in the armor he could see. Within seconds, the fiend collapsed low enough for Zack to pierce its windpipe.

When Zack withdrew his sword, he noticed the body of the first fiend had already dissipated. The second immediately followed suit, disappearing into specks of green. The fight was won. Easy peasy, as it should be.

…thanks to his limit system *working* for him, this time around.

As though sensing his success, Zack's PHS ran in his pocket. He pulled the device out, seeing Angeal's name on the screen. Right—Angeal was going to want the good news. Answering, Zack reported, "SOLDER Second Class Zack, victorious again!"

"*Good work*," Angeal praised. "*Now, get out of there. You've only got five minutes.*'

"Got it!" Zack replied, quickly stowing his PHS again. Five minutes was *plenty*.

Or, it would have been, if yet another massive monster didn't drop out of the ceiling at that moment.

Zack let out a growl of frustration. He typically enjoyed fighting, when his limit break cooperated. He was good at it. But this much was beginning to push it, even for him—especially now that there was a time limit.

The new fiend hefted a heavy mace, swinging right for him.

Zack dove to the side, out of the way, and the mace smashed the painted stones of the floor, instead. Glowering at the beast, Zack searched for any signs of a weak point in all the armor. He was going to have to make this quick. And, preferably, not get hit by that mace.

Just as Zack spotted a potential slicing spot, the monster roared, dragging its weapon and scratching grooves in the floor as it drew near.

Backing up to give himself just a smidge more running room, Zack then darted full speed at the fiend. He leapt at it, swinging his sword in a broad, deadly arc across its skull.

The impact sent the fiend to the floor, stumbling and landing head first in a heap.

Waiting a beat, Zack watched, intently. It *looked* dead. Ordinarily, this would have been cause to celebrate. Or, to get closer, to examine the thing. Remembering he already ignored Sephiroth's advice several times today, Zack opted to hang back, keeping a close eye on the creature as he maintained a charge of Fire.

Suddenly, movement.

The monster shifted swiftly to push itself up—only feigning defeat, after all.

Zack reacted in a panic, flinging his Fire and blasting the beast right in its face.

Howling, the fiend stumbled backward, whacking itself with humongous hands to try to put out the flames. It tripped in its efforts, knees buckling as it crashed back to the floor. Another blast of Fire had it recoiling, roaring with a rage directed to the heavens.

Dashing forward, Zack slashed sharply across its vulnerable throat.

This time, when the fiend fell to the floor, Zack knew for sure it was dead. He held his sword out anyway, panting with the effort of battle, only to belatedly realize he just saved his own skin by following Sephiroth's instructions. He didn't even need his limit break, that time —not one buff. Just basic precision, and staying a little more wary when the monster went down.

The new techniques *worked*—he really should have been trying them before. Zack huffed a relieved, elated laugh, easing his stance as the beast's body began to dissipate to sparkling green.

Sephiroth is gonna be so psyched when he hears about this—

"Well done," came Angeal's voice, surprisingly. The man himself stepped out from behind a pillar, a pleased smile on his face. "I thought for a moment I may have to intervene, when I came in," he told Zack as he walked closer. "You kept your focus."

Zack's excitement deflated somewhat. Paradoxically so, he thought. He succeeded, and here was his mentor, acknowledging that. He was getting *praise*, and yet…Focus, he was pretty sure, had nothing to do with it. "Uh…yeah," Zack agreed anyway, half-heartedly, not wanting to inadvertently cause another argument. Angeal seemed annoyed enough when Zack brought up Sephiroth's thoughts about his limit system. If Zack now said the only reason he was 'focused' was because he remembered the workaround Sephiroth taught him—

"Let's get moving—We have to rendezvous with Lazard," Angeal said, interrupting Zack's thoughts.

Zack nodded, his nerves returning just as the adrenaline began to wear off. He followed Angeal out of the arena, and they made their way out of the fort entirely. Being among the trees and out of immediate danger, though, didn't do much to reduce Zack's stress.

Going to find Lazard only reminded him this mission was very much a *test*, after all.

Considering the carnage he left in the fort, he was probably *strong* enough to be a First. But, would he have thought to verify the last monster's death, if not for Sephiroth's instruction? He still didn't really get what Angeal meant by 'SOLDIER honor,' either—if anything, Wutai seemed to be under the impression that SOLDIER didn't have any honor to speak of.

And then, as they ran through rough beaten paths in the foliage, Zack remembered the captain's description—of SOLDIER only bringing pain, and despair.

Following Angeal through the dark, Zack wondered if he'd ever understand how it all connected.

While Zack did earn a fair amount of praise from the Director, the festivities were soon cut short—rather than go meet up with Sephiroth, as planned, the three of them were ambushed by a group of strange, masked men.

Two went down without much fight, but the Director had no training, and there were more combatants incoming. Rather than gamble with his safety, Angeal tasked Zack with getting him to the Security Officers stationed nearby. So, Zack went, covering for Lazard as they ran to the meeting point.

They found the officers quick enough, but Zack couldn't help but feel peeved as Lazard sent him off to go assist Angeal again.

Why wasn't he with Security to begin with? Zack wondered, boots pounding the dirt as he sped back to the clearing. The Director was a smart guy—he should know better than to run around an active mission in enemy territory *alone*. It was weird behavior, on his and Security's part.

Nothing for it, though—he had to find Angeal.

When Zack reached the clearing, Angeal was nowhere in sight. A couple of the masked men remained, however, all lying on the ground, seemingly unconscious. Zack approached them warily, taking the time to really *look* at the strange clothes they wore. Both men were dressed the same, as if in a uniform of some sort, though it wasn't one Zack recognized. A bright red visor covered their faces, marked with a large, silver X. Their clothes were also red, for the most part, with black feathers at their left shoulders, under their pauldrons.

Pauldrons that, at a glance, looked eerily reminiscent of the same type Zack was currently wearing, as a SOLDIER operative.

These men weren't in any unit involved with the operation, though, as far as Zack was aware. He frowned at them confusedly, wondering if maybe Wutai had tried to dress them similarly, as spies. But, then, too many of the details were off. Too many for them to be ninjas, either.

"These aren't Wutai troops…" Zack concluded, though he felt no closer to an actual answer. The mission brief didn't mention any other hostiles—

A fiery glow creeped into Zack's vision, and he whipped his head back up just to see a red orb of materia—floating, and active—right in front of him.

As the materia flashed, Zack shielded his eyes from the spell circle flaring to life around him. When the light died down enough, he found he was no longer in the woods, but an almost *volcanic* landscape. Towering rocks rose out of the ground like claws, caging him in, and smoke billowed all around. The air itself felt as though it, too, was on fire—stiflingly hot and a bright, disconcerting red, colored by all the burning bits of ground.

Then, Zack heard a low, threatening growl behind him.

He whirled around, coming face-to-face with what was unmistakably *Ifrit*, the beast's humongous horns and glowing, burning physique all a dead ringer from the stories. "A *summon?!*" Zack questioned, hand scrambling for his sword. "Who called it out?!" he asked the air, sure he was alone just seconds before.

Though, if he wasn't alone then, he certainly was now—The pillars of flame and rock all around him had Zack recalling Sephiroth's description of summons. Of how they created entirely different spaces, like the VR room. If Zack didn't find a way to take Ifrit down, he would be well and truly *trapped*.

Ifrit let out a battle cry, roaring before raising its clawed hands, already prepared to fight.

Zack fought down the urge to panic, thinking. Obviously, Ifrit was a fire elemental—a magical being. Precision could only help so much when the body was *made* of mana. Ice spells would have to do. So, he hurriedly cast Blizzard, getting in a lucky shot before Ifrit had a chance to charge. Even more luckily, he felt no drain on his mana, so he cast again, and again.

Ifrit slipped through the spells after the second chunk of ice, leaping toward Zack. It reached him in a single bound, and then stomped down at Zack. While Zack managed to deflect it, Ifrit immediately followed up with a punch, sending Zack stumbling backward.

By the time Zack regained his footing, he saw fireballs erupt in Ifrit's hands.

Hoping to cancel out the summon's concentration with his own magic, Zack charged a Blizzard, only to instantly realize his mana was already spent. He scrambled for one of his few remaining ethers, but in doing so, missed his chance to dodge the first of the fireballs. Just as he registered the burning sensation, and that he needed to *move*, a second ball burst across his skin. Then a third.

Zack downed the ether the second he could see, sidestepping in case there was more magic headed his way. When nothing came, he concentrated on a Cure, instead—if he took too many of those blasts to his already injured arms, he wasn't going to be able to hold his sword—

When he looked at Ifrit again, the summon held its hands in an odd, circular position, crackles of magic flickering over its clawed fingers.

Whatever was coming, it would be bad—Zack ran at Ifrit, hacking at it with his sword. The blade barely broke skin, and Ifrit didn't so much as shift under the onslaught, still fully focused.

Suddenly Ifrit roared, and leapt into the air.

Zack watched with dismay as the summon's magic spread over the sky itself, everything but the flames around them going pitch black. Ifrit twisted in the air as it fell back to the ground, spurts of fire erupting over its body. Then, rearing its arm back, Ifrit slammed the ground with its fist.

Bursts of lava surged from the cracks left in the earth, and Ifrit drew the flames onto itself, becoming a whirling, living tornado of fire.

Then, it charged right at Zack.

The fire spread so wide, Zack had no hope of dodging. He attempted, still, jumping to the side just in time to not get bowled over by Ifrit itself, but the attack left streams of fire in its wake. Zack landed in them, biting back a scream at the searing pain on his skin, and rolled as best he could out of the way.

Getting up, Zack came face to face with Ifrit's fist.

The punch smashed across his jaw, but that, Zack noted, didn't hurt at all—his limit break, finally coming to the rescue. He retaliated immediately, slashing at Ifrit's chest, until his attacks started pushing the summon back.

Ifrit had only stepped back a few paces though, when fireballs gathered in its hands again.

Zack ducked under the first spell, feeling the heat of it overhead. The second and third, though, he didn't see coming, and Zack struggled to keep his hands steady after all the burns. He bolted toward the edge of the space Ifrit created, not caring if the summon followed—he needed

to get some distance, *now*.

Downing a potion, Zack wracked his brain—He had enough mana for a few more Blizzards, but that might not be enough. Slashing at the summon barely seemed to do much. Despite not using many supplies in the fort, he was rapidly running out.

And, looking up, Ifrit was charging at him again.

Zack dashed out of the way, avoiding another kick, wishing he had some way to practice summon fights in VR. Wished his limit break would give him *something*, like Rush Assault. Even Chain Slash—

He searched the towering rocks in the distance, wishing he wasn't doing this shit *alone*.

Just like the fight with the Crescent Unit, he was sure his limit system was giving him some kind of buff. The problem was that it wasn't the ones he *needed*, and now that he knew how it worked, its randomness was terrifying in a fight like this.

Ifrit shifted its stance again, holding its arms in that same, circular sigil.

Zack panicked, casting Blizzard after Blizzard, heedless of his limit break and his mana if it meant it would stop the oncoming spell. When, finally, Ifrit flinched, Zack ran forward with his sword, stabbing and slashing with abandon. Ifrit recoiled, flickers of flame at its fingertips as it attempted different magic.

Then, Zack felt the familiar surge of Supernova at the ready, and he unleashed it full force.

Even if he cast the spell wrong, he figured the flat damage would be devastating. Would be enough, as Ifrit was engulfed in the stronger flames of an exploding star. It *had* to be enough—

When the spell finished, Ifrit was still standing.

Zack stared in horror as Ifrit snarled at him. His skin burned with every movement. His arms ached. The flames were all so bright his eyes hurt, and the air choked his lungs—

For the first time in a while, Zack was scared.

This time, when Ifrit hurled fireballs, Zack ran.

He ran as hard and fast as he could, pushing his enhancements to the limit just in an effort to evade. Fleeing the flames worked well enough, but he knew he couldn't get out of this place—he was still stuck here, no matter how many laps he ran around Ifrit. Ifrit crouched, preparing to charge him again, and Zack felt his stomach sink. He couldn't keep this up. He was already burning out—

Ifrit sped toward him, and Zack rolled out of the way. The instant he was standing again, he cast another Blizzard and hoped he'd still have enough mana for a second.

The ice block smashed Ifrit right between its horns, and the summon fell forward, crashing to the ground.

Zack watched it, relieved, but he couldn't keep his eyes from darting around in anxious dread. The blazing boulders were still all around him. Still looming. Still reaching for him like they meant to drag him under the earth, with Ifrit.

…*if the space is still there, it's not dead*, Zack remembered, and swiftly raised his arm to cast at the limp form of the summon.

Only, right when he was about to let loose, Zack's mind grinded to a halt—in a way he knew was his damned limit break screwing him over. Like a pot just collided with his skull.

Zack pitched forward, losing his grip on the spell and grabbing his aching head, instead. He shook it, disoriented and dizzy, the action only serving to make him that much more so. His vision swam as he looked up, squinting, trying to get a sense of how much time he had to charge another Blizzard—

Just to see Ifrit, a fireball crackling in its hand, hurling its own magic right at him.

Zack yelped in alarm, crouching, barely able to even brace himself before he felt a *whoosh* of air rush past him, and the burning, agonizing heat of the flames.

…yet, those flames weren't touching him, surprisingly.

Risking a glance upward, Zack found not a snarling summon staring him down, but the familiar, welcome sight of a billowing black coat, and long, silver hair—Sephiroth, having arrived just in time.

Sephiroth shifted his stance in front of Zack, reorienting Masamune as

sparks of violet magic danced down its blade. Then, in a blink, Sephiroth charged, piercing straight through the summon as if wielding a spear. Ifrit howled as the magic holding it together came undone, bursting violently into a cloud of smoke and sparks. As it cleared, Zack could see Sephiroth straighten, lowering his weapon, and the summoned space they stood in faded softly back into the dark woods of Wutai.

“Sephiroth—” Zack sighed with relief, shakily getting to his feet.

Sephiroth turned to him, quickly looking Zack up and down, assessing. “You staggered,” he observed with a frown. “A dud?”

Zack beamed at the clear indication that Sephiroth remembered even the weird, rarest functions of his limit break. No explanation necessary. Instead, Zack nodded, exhaustedly. “Guess getting duds is, uh…still a problem, after all,” he observed.

Sephiroth’s eyes softened, but only briefly, immediately stern again as he moved on to examine the masked men. He crouched down next to them, looking over the injuries along their bodies. Then, roughly, he yanked off the nearest man’s mask.

Instantly, Zack recognized him. The man’s face was starkly familiar, as was his brown hair fanning out around his head. The sharp jaw and delicate features were an exact match to the man he was replacing on this very mission.

“Genesis…” Sephiroth muttered.

“The missing SOLDIER First Class?” Zack questioned, stepping closer to get a better look. The resemblance was uncanny, but Genesis’s presence here felt so far-fetched—all of the masked men went down easier than any SOLDIER would—

Then, Sephiroth pulled off the other man’s mask, revealing the exact same face beneath it.

“They’re *identical!*” Zack exclaimed.

“A Genesis copy,” Sephiroth supplied softly.

“Copy?” Zack repeated, certain he couldn’t have heard that right. That would mean someone would have *created* another—but *how—?* “A human copy?” Zack babbled, baffled.

Before Zack could even begin to wrap his mind around the concept, Sephiroth addressed him, speaking over his shoulder. “Where is Angeal?”

And Zack, his heart gripped with fear, realized he had no idea.

Adjusting to Absence

Chapter Summary

> After Angeal's disappearance, Zack struggles to establish a new routine.

Chapter Notes

> Happy Sunday and happy holidays everyone!! Hope everyone is having/has a great season.
>
> I truly love that I went into this fic like “Man the DMW works really well for describing having ADHD!” only for the DMW, much like my own ADHD, to get infinitely weirder and more pervasive throughout Zack’s entire Zackness, the more I dig into it.

Angeal was nowhere to be found.

Zack stared at the ceiling of his bedroom, ignoring the music from his alarm. The mission was long over, and he couldn’t stop running over the events in his mind. They all went home *without* Angeal. Didn’t even spare time to search. Sephiroth, and even Director Lazard were confident that there was no point. That Angeal was gone, and that it was *intentional*. A desertion.

Even a week later, Zack didn’t want to believe it. Wouldn’t believe it. He didn’t care what Sephiroth thought—Angeal wouldn’t betray them. He had to still be out there somewhere, in Wutai. He might have been hurt. Might have been caught up by a summon, just like Zack was, and they…They just *left* him.

Not only left, but *accused* him, in Sephiroth’s case, of being in league with Genesis.

The thought twisted Zack’s gut, sickening him with fear and anger intertwined. He needed to get up—the fact that his alarm stopped playing was indicator enough that he was spending too long glaring at nothing, instead of doing something. *Anything.*

Zack sat up slowly, grabbing his PHS to fully dismiss the alarm. He stared sightlessly at the device, thumb hovering over the shortcut to his messages, wondering. There must have been a *reason* Sephiroth

was so certain, right? Even if none of this made any damn sense.

The problem was that Zack didn't trust himself to talk to Sephiroth right now without blowing up at the guy.

Sephiroth seemed to sense that too, having been entirely silent since that helicopter ride back to HQ. No discussion. No updates. No training scheduled. Nothing.

It infuriated Zack all the more.

Eventually, Zack got up. Grabbed breakfast. Got his uniform on, and got nearly out the door. It was as he went to grab his key that he wondered what the point of going to work even was, right now.

His training was on hold, clearly. He could work on modules by himself, but he was pretty sure he'd only end up fighting VR monsters until he collapsed. Then he would come home, sleep, and do it all again tomorrow. The same routine he'd been doing for a week.

There was no word on whether he passed the test, either—Lazard hadn't even given him a new assignment, let alone a promotion to First. Despite how they were, apparently, *extremely* short-staffed now.

A massive number of Seconds and Thirds, all deserted. All following Genesis, for whatever reason. Zack didn't get it, and no one would explain.

Sephiroth *usually* tried to, when Zack asked, but…

Zack grimaced, grabbing his key, and pulling his PHS out again. He brought up Sephiroth's number, hesitating for a moment before he pressed the call button. Zack knew he was going to sound pissed off when Sephiroth answered, but he couldn't bring himself to care anymore. He felt too miserable to even *think* about practicing Supernova while not on speaking terms with its user.

The call didn't even ring, going straight to voicemail.

With an irritated grunt, Zack hung up, quickly texting Sephiroth instead. He kept it simple: 'Can we talk about what's going on?' and nothing more. That was enough, he thought. It was probably too casual for him to text his superior officer, technically, but it was the same way he always messaged Angeal.

…not that Angeal was answering, either.

Shaking his head in an effort to focus on anything else, Zack headed out of the apartment, grateful that Kunsel wasn't home to be nosy about why Zack was so mad, so early.

Yet, just as he managed to lock the front door, his PHS beeped. Surprised, Zack pulled it back out, seeing he already got a reply.

In a meeting. Will be in my office at 0930.

Well, that explained the call going to voicemail, Zack supposed, his anger somewhat appeased by the invitation to stop by. And the fast response. Sephiroth was *willing* to talk, at least.

Though, whether Zack ended up talking, or *yelling* at him, remained to be seen.

After he got to HQ, and the SOLDIER Floor, he occupied his time with a regular monster module. Every limit break he landed on was Rush Assault, frustratingly. Even when Zack tried thinking about how Sephiroth's reaction in Wutai pissed him off, he couldn't manage to do anything but worry about Angeal, instead. His limit break was stuck on that, as a result. Zack knew the whole system was pretty much linked to his emotions, but after the fourth Rush Assault in a row, it was driving him up a wall.

When it was close enough to nine-thirty, Zack dropped his attempts to even pretend he was working out the intricacies of his limit break, and made his way to Sephiroth's office.

He got there before Sephiroth, pacing in front of the locked door for several minutes, until he saw the First get off the elevator. Sephiroth's expression didn't change, on seeing Zack. Barely even acknowledged him, bypassing Zack entirely to unlock the door.

"Hey," Zack greeted sharply.

"Morning," Sephiroth replied quietly, and then summarily walked inside.

The surprising softness of Sephiroth's demeanor blunted some of Zack's own edge, and he followed the First into the office. Sephiroth didn't speak again, busying himself at his desk, and Zack's eyes roamed over the space, immediately struck with how *empty* it felt.

There was plenty in the room, of course—a standard, sleek desk with a top of the line monitor. Regular office supplies, all in black and

white, like they were meant to match Sephiroth's uniform. Modern leather chairs were set near the desk, for guests, along with a sofa, that all looked as though they saw little actual use. The one touch that seemed uniquely Sephiroth's was that the lights were dimmer here than Zack was used to, in the Shinra Building. It was nicer—easier on enhanced eyes.

Then Zack's gaze landed on a terracotta pot, housing a large, branching fern in the back corner.

Zack frowned questioningly at it, so at odds with the rest of the decor.

Sephiroth caught the staring as he sat down at his desk. He followed Zack's gaze, only to softly utter, "Angeal's addition."

"He gave you a plant?" Zack asked, not pegging Sephiroth as having much of a green thumb.

"A gift to…'liven the place up,' he said."

A gift that appeared well cared for, considering how large and green and *alive* it was, Zack thought. He glanced back at Sephiroth, only to then notice the exhausted slump of the man's shoulders, like the pauldrons he wore were somehow heavier, now. Sephiroth, for his part, stared down at his PHS, eyes half-lidded not from disinterest, but from a tiredness that seemed sunken into his entire being. The guy was stiff on a good day, but today…

Today it seemed like all that bracing for duty was taking its toll.

"Are you…okay?" Zack inquired, a little unnerved by the difference from Sephiroth's usual attitude.

"Fine," Sephiroth stated, straightening, instantly braced once more. Yet, he still didn't look at Zack. "You said you wanted to discuss things."

"…yeah," Zack nodded, sitting down in the chair directly opposite Sephiroth. If the guy had seemed down before Angeal left, it was nothing compared to the weight Zack saw just moments before. And now, it was gone, in a blink. Weird. Still, not wanting to waste the chance he had now, Zack got right to the point. "Why are you so positive Angeal deserted?" he questioned. "He cares too much about his SOLDIER honor to do something like that."

Sephiroth's eyes fell shut, as he sighed through his nose. "…Genesis."

“What about him?”

“He and Angeal are childhood friends,” Sephiroth explained, his voice flat.

Instantly, the correlation clicked. Of course, Angeal would never leave SOLDIER on his own. But, to help an old friend? One who already deserted the Company?

That was *far* more in line with Angeal’s talk of *honor*, even if Zack hated it.

“...oh,” was all Zack managed to mutter, suddenly entirely understanding why Sephiroth and Lazard lumped the pair together.

“You didn’t know,” Sephiroth observed, and Zack looked up to see the man staring at him. Like some question of his own had been answered, in turn.

“No, I…he didn’t say anything,” Zack said, thinking back on the briefing with Lazard. On how Angeal had bowed his head, not once looking at the photo of Genesis, projected on the wall.

A childhood friend, missing. One who took a bunch of operatives with him, to apparently fight the very Company he used to work for. No sign of him for a *month*. Angeal must have been worried sick, and yet…

“Why didn’t he *tell* me?” Zack wondered, searching for the answer fruitlessly in his empty hands. Angeal’s own mentee, filling in on the mission Genesis was *supposed* to be on. It was no wonder Angeal was so on edge.

“It was a difficult subject,” Sephiroth noted. “One I expect he wanted to distance himself from, where possible.”

“He still could’ve said *something!*” Zack snapped, glowering at Sephiroth. “I mean—If he wanted to help Genesis, why not just—Why leave Shinra like that?! Why would he…?!”

“I see we’re on the same page now,” Sephiroth determined, but his smile was weak, and bitter.

Zack’s fuming faltered, realizing Sephiroth must feel as lost as he did. “You don’t know why, either,” Zack clarified.

Sephiroth merely shook his head. It was a slight thing. Tightly controlled. “Only guesses. No evidence, much to the chagrin of the people investigating his disappearance.”

The anger Zack felt this morning for Sephiroth evaporated, knowing they were stuck in the same boat. What was left in the anger’s wake was unmistakable, overwhelming anguish. “He…He recommended me for *First*,” Zack recalled, the fear of rushing into the position too soon now lining up with Angeal’s apparent plans for desertion. “He kept telling me I’d be fine, and then he just…”

“...yes,” Sephiroth acknowledged, the tiniest hint of frustration returning to his voice, at the mention.

Zack slumped in the chair, the tough leather uncomfortable, but too unwilling to move. Even with Sephiroth only sitting with him, silent, it felt marginally better than the thought of getting up to go stew in all of these new realizations. “This is all stupid,” Zack decided petulantly.

A quiet huff from Sephiroth told him the comment was at least a little amusing, despite everything. “Agreed,” Sephiroth said.

“What do we even…? Should I even bother working on Supernova right now?” Zack asked him. “Or like, First Class…stuff? Lazard hasn’t said anything to you, has he?”

“He hasn’t,” Sephiroth informed him, shifting to check something on his monitor. “I imagine your promotion isn’t high on his list of priorities, at the moment.”

“Makes sense,” Zack admitted, sullenly sinking further into the chair.

“As for Supernova,” Sephiroth began, his eyes drifting back to Zack, “I’ve been assigned several missions from both Genesis and Angeal’s old caseloads, so I’m not entirely sure when I’ll have time to help you with it.”

Zack grimaced. That sounded like a ton of work, on top of everything else happening. “It’s okay,” he assured Sephiroth. “I haven’t been able to hit it this past week, anyway. I keep…uh,” he winced. “...hitting Rush Assault, instead.”

Before Sephiroth could respond, his PHS pinged in his pocket. He drew out the device, checking it while muttering, “Understandable, given the circumstances.”

Zack hummed in reply, watching him read whatever message he got. Watching the flicker of annoyance flash over Sephiroth's features, before his face resumed that blank, controlled neutral. *How does he do that?* Zack wondered, with the sense that he probably shouldn't ask right this moment. Instead, he struggled to sit upright again, inquiring, "More work stuff?"

"Another last-minute meeting," Sephiroth answered. He frowned, apologetic when he met Zack's gaze. "I should be back in Midgar in a couple of weeks. We can make time to assess your limit break again, then."

Nodding, Zack stood up, reluctantly. He felt a little better, now. If entirely drained. As he started heading out, he couldn't help but think there were other things he should have mentioned. More words that needed saying. After all, they hadn't really talked since Sephiroth rescued him from that summon.

…which, now that he thought of it, Zack hadn't really said anything appreciative, at the time.

"Hey, uh—" Zack started, stopping just short of the door. "I forgot—I meant to thank you for jumping in, with Ifrit." He shot Sephiroth a weak, but genuine grin. "I owe ya one."

Managing a soft smile of his own, Sephiroth replied, "You're welcome, but you don't owe me anything."

"Nuh-uh," Zack denied firmly, holding a finger out as he made his point. "One day, *I'm* gonna make the badass save and come to *your* rescue. You'll see!"

Sephiroth chuckled. "Very well," he relented, his smile a little stronger, this time. "I'll look forward to it."

The next couple of weeks passed by in a bittersweet blur. On the one hand, Zack finally started picking up a couple of short, easy missions, to supplement the lack of Seconds and Thirds. Ordinary fiend extermination, mostly on the outskirts of Midgar. Nothing exciting, but it was enough to get him *moving*, and to see the progress from all his work on his basics.

On the other hand, neither of his mentors were there to *see* that progress.

So, while the monster missions helped him keep his mind off things for the short-term, by the time Zack got back to his apartment, all the worries and stressors of Angeal's desertion started to sink back in. A fresh change of clothes and a nice warm meal weren't enough to keep those thoughts at bay. Nor was scrolling on his PHS. That option only increased his desire to text Sephiroth useless questions, when he knew the man was too busy to reply.

It was while Zack was restlessly scrolling that the front door opened, and Kunsel walked in with a loud sigh.

On noticing Zack, Kunsel perked up. "Oh, you're home! Thought you'd be training late at HQ again."

"Kuns!" Zack exclaimed, rushing from the couch to tackle his roommate into a bone-crushing hug. "You're back! I missed you!"

Kunsel laughed, returning the embrace as much as his pinned arms could manage. "Missed you, too," he replied, his voice strained from how tight Zack's hold was. When Zack let go, Kunsel readjusted his pauldrons, removing them for the night. "I take it you're done with your mission," Kunsel observed.

"Easy peasy," Zack reported, albeit grumpily. He crossed his arms across his chest, scowling as Kunsel set his sword aside. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think they were putting me out to pasture—I barely have anything to do."

Pausing, Kunsel stared at Zack, contemplative for a moment. Then, with an amused smirk, he asked, "Have you considered you might just be finishing stuff *way* faster than everyone else? Maybe some of us should start pushing our missions on you."

Zack narrowed his eyes at him. "No thanks," he denied. "I'm guessing yours are just run-of-the-mill monster missions, too. *Boring.*"

"Ah, so that's the problem," Kunsel laughed. He pondered over his belongings for a moment, blatantly debating carrying his pack and supplies over to his bedroom, before turning back to Zack. "In that case, how about we go check out Sector 8? Might be able to catch a show or something."

"Yes! I—wait," Zack halted mid fist pump, eyeing Kunsel suspiciously as the man went to change out of his uniform. "...who's paying?"

"If we can snag tickets for *Loveless*, both of us—those things are

expensive," Kunsel informed him, raising his voice as he disappeared into his room.

"We could also just wander around!" Zack suggested, retrieving his wallet from his own bedroom, digging through several pairs of pants before he did. When said wallet finally revealed itself, it was as light as Zack suspected. "...and people watch, maybe? That's free," he continued. "I don't think I've even been to Sector 8, anyway."

"How have you *not* been to Sector 8?"

"I've been *busy!*" Zack retorted, heading back out to the living room to pout at his roommate's door. "You think I made Second by running around Midgar watching fancy plays?"

"Yeah, yeah, 'one of the youngest Seconds of our generation,' I *know*," Kunsel recited good-naturedly. He emerged from his room, dressed down to his civilian wear, complete with a pair of dark sunglasses.

"What are those for?" Zack questioned, pointing at his own eyes as clarification.

"The vibe, man," Kunsel answered, adjusting the frames.

"Is the *vibe* being unable to see at night?" Zack joked, going to get his shoes on. "Who wears sunglasses this late?"

"One of the Turks does!" Kunsel revealed defensively, scowling, but when he went to open the door, he kindly held it for Zack anyway. "Plus, SOLDIER eyes—I'll be able to see just fine, thank you very much."

"I'll take your word for it," Zack laughed.

"You should," Kunsel affirmed, exiting just after Zack, and locking up. "I'm full of useful knowledge. You'd know that if you ever read my damn emails."

Scoffing, Zack grinned cheekily, and then leaned on the wall as he waited for Kunsel to finish up. "Does that useful knowledge include the fastest way to Sector 8 from here?"

"*Obviously*. That, and the best pizza joint in town," Kunsel declared, returning Zack's grin. "I'm an expert in these things. You're very fortunate to have friends in such high places."

“High places, like your high horse?” Zack shot back.

“*Ha, ha,*” Kunsel snarked, lightly whacking Zack’s arm before getting a move on. “Let’s go. I’ll make you eat those words.”

Zack did, in fact, eat his words, along with the best pizza he ever tasted since moving to Midgar. Afterward, the duo decided to meander around the Sector’s main square, just off Loveless Avenue. Long overdue sight-seeing, Kunsel called it.

Midgar was a marvel of engineering anywhere he walked, but Zack enjoyed wandering about the streets to really experience the city, even more than his first look at the Plate. People were off work at this hour, for the most part, walking along the brick-paved, closed off roads without a care. Some, he noticed, were heading under the large archway that led to Loveless Avenue, chatting animatedly with friends.

“Might be too late for a show,” Kunsel noted, eyeing the large clock ticking away at the top of the arch.

Zack looked around, content to take in the bustling atmosphere. “Then, where to, Mr. Expert?” he teased, not particularly caring where they ended up. He was happy just to be out of his apartment, with a friend, taking a very much needed break.

“I may be the expert, but this is *your* first time here,” Kunsel retorted, walking a little further into the square. He watched the large fountain at the center for a moment, thinking, only to turn and smirk at Zack. “Maybe I should just let you wander around by yourself, if you’re gonna sass me like this.”

“No way! After dragging me all the way out here?!”

“I’ve been having to make decisions all day; I’m tapped out,” Kunsel shrugged. “You pick something.”

Zack pouted at him, looking around again, this time for something to do. As his eyes roamed over a sign for a motor shop, he caught sight of a group of women not far off. The three of them appeared civil enough at first, only standing a polite distance apart, but were speaking with an intensity that immediately grabbed Zack’s attention.

“And *when* was the last time you heard about him in the papers?” asked one of the women, adjusting her smart-looking, gray business

suit nonchalantly as she addressed the blonde in their group.

The blonde balled her fists, snapping back, “Only because the media is so obsessed with *Sephiroth!*”

“What the—?” Zack uttered, and next to him, Kunsel watched the group, too.

The third woman, a brunette in a more homely outfit, held up her hand as she attempted to pacify the other two. “While there’s certainly some media bias, I think we can all agree they wouldn’t want us fighting each other, would they? I know Angeal would—”

“There’s no contest,” stated the woman in the business suit. “Sephiroth is the best, objectively.”

“*Bias*,” scoffed the blonde, insistently, turning her nose up. “Genesis is, and we’ll *prove* it.”

Kunsel sighed quietly, and then, speaking only loud enough for Zack to hear, muttered, “Groupies.”

“Huh?” Zack directed a confused frown at his friend.

“Some of the Firsts have fan clubs,” Kunsel explained tiredly, and then moved to walk elsewhere. “Come on, we should go.”

Zack could buy Sephiroth having fan clubs. It made sense, with the guy’s level of fame. Angeal, too, with how he treated his juniors. However, that left one, very questionable choice in Zack’s mind. “*Genesis* has fan clubs? How come I’ve barely heard about the guy if he’s got *fan clubs?*” Zack hissed.

“Exactly what those three are arguing about—he wasn’t in the papers much. Angeal either,” Kunsel summarized, shrugging. “They’re *there*, if you look hard enough, but nowhere near as front-and-center as Sephiroth. I heard it was Genesis’s rich parents who fund his main club—”

“Excuse me!” called the brunette, waving at the pair of them. “Are you two in SOLDIER?”

“Uh—” Zack faltered, unsure if he should confirm or deny, when the blonde zeroed in on him.

“You must be!” the blonde insisted as the group of women

approached. “You have mako eyes!”

“Maybe you could settle this for us,” said the brunette. “We were just talking about who the greatest SOLDIER operative might be.” She smiled pleasantly at him, soon getting a dreamy, far-off look on her face. “For me, it’s Angeal. He’s so straight-laced, and thrifty to boot!”

Stomach twisting at the mention, Zack didn’t know what to say. It was an accurate assessment, sure, but Angeal was—He couldn’t explain. It was classified information that Angeal was gone. A *deserter*.

…perhaps even the opposite of ‘straight-laced,’ now.

Zack was so mired in how Angeal’s disappearance affected him, he hadn’t spared a thought about what the desertion would do to everyone else. His fans. His *friends*—

“If we’re talking about the greatest in SOLDIER, I can’t think of anyone other than Sephiroth,” the woman in the gray suit piped up. Then, despite her serious expression and own, straight-laced appearance, she continued, “Just imagining him walking around shirtless is enough to make me swoon…!”

“You two don’t know what you’re talking about!” snapped the Genesis fan. “This is the age of Genesis! There’s nobody better in SOLDIER than him!”

Zack and Kunsel shared an awkward glance. If Zack didn’t know what to say to the Angeal fan, the other two left him at a complete loss. Genesis, he didn’t even want to comment on. And Sephiroth—Impressive as he undeniably was, there was more to him than just his looks and SOLDIER record, surely—

The women gave him no time to respond, however, the Angeal fan suddenly addressed Zack again. “I know! How would you two like to join Keepers of Honor?”

“They *should* join Red Leather,” the Genesis fan cut her off. She directed a self-satisfied smile at the SOLDIERs. “Unlike many clubs, *our* group is well-funded by a generous sponsor—”

Ah, the one funded by his parents, Zack guessed.

“—and we sell merchandise, like recreations of Genesis’s signature red coat, and dumbapple keychains!”

The pitch gave Zack pause. *Dumbapples.* Those were the fruit Angeal mentioned on the way to Fort Tamblin—something about needing to know about them in order to become a First. But, what in the world did they have to do with *Genesis?*

“If you just give us your email address—” started the Angeal fan, holding up her PHS toward Kunsel.

“Sorry, I’m actually in both already,” Kunsel revealed, holding his hands up and grinning. “This guy, here, though,” he said, giving Zack a hearty, heavy pat on the back, “would *love* to join.”

“Wh—Kunsel!” Zack protested, to no avail.

Finding it too difficult to turn down the pushy fans, especially with Kunsel goading them on, Zack ultimately surrendered. The Sephiroth fan, blessedly, had no club for him to join, only mentioning the mysterious *Silver Elite* before Zack got strong-armed into the other two clubs. All signed up, and two weird emails later, he and Kunsel parted ways with the group and headed, once again, for Loveless Avenue.

When they were far enough out of earshot, Kunsel started snickering. “I think I’ve seen you less panicked fighting a *behemoth*,” he whispered to Zack.

“Y’know, you could’ve just included me in the lie about already being in the clubs,” Zack shot back with a scowl.

“It wasn’t a lie!”

Zack stopped in his tracks, just under the arch of the avenue, staring open-mouthed at Kunsel. “You—*Why* would you join SOLDIER fan clubs?”

“You’d be surprised at the info you can gather in them,” Kunsel said, waving the matter off. “Good way to track if there’s any leaks coming out of Shinra, too, if they know something they shouldn’t.”

While Zack couldn’t initially imagine what sort of secret intel could possibly fall into the hands of such groups, the thought immediately brought him back to the keychains. “You mean, like dumbapples?” Zack asked.

The look Kunsel gave him was a long one. Significantly perplexed. He tilted his head in several directions before finally, exasperatedly, questioning, “What do you *mean* ‘like dumbapples?’”

So, perhaps they weren't so secret, after all. "What…are they?" Zack asked with a sheepish wince.

"Apples," Kunsel supplied unhelpfully, gesturing hopelessly with his hands as if this should be fully self-explanatory. "Apples that are *dumb*." When Zack only stared at him, helpless in his ignorance, Kunsel put his hands on his hips, his own frown as quizzical as Zack's. "…they don't get shipped to Gongaga?"

"Nope."

"They're a product from Banora—the Banora White apple," Kunsel explained. "Locals call them dumb because they fruit unpredictably throughout the year, and the name stuck. Their biggest export is apple juice."

Just apples, then. Strange ones, from the sound of it, but Zack was no closer to an answer regarding Angeal's sudden fruit interrogation. Or why the keychains were a big deal. "And…Genesis? Why does his fan club have dumbapple merch?"

"Genesis is from Banora," Kunsel revealed. "Actually, I think his family's connected to the juice industry. That's how they made most of their money…" Kunsel paused in his infodump, regarding Zack with curiosity. "What's so important about them?"

"I dunno, that's why I'm asking!" Zack answered, gesturing in frustration. "Angeal told me I'd never make First if I didn't know about dumbapples!"

Kunsel went quiet for a worrying length of time, contemplating. And then, to Zack's surprise, openly admitted, "I have no fucking clue, man."

For Kunsel, of all people, to have no idea, was more devastating than *Ultima*, in Zack's personal opinion. "Seriously?" he questioned. "Nothing?"

"Look, I don't get stumped easily," Kunsel asserted, "but you did it. I'm stumped."

Zack sighed heavily, slumping forward and hanging his head in defeat. If even *Kunsel* didn't know, there was no way Zack would figure it out on his own. His only choice now, unless Angeal miraculously answered him, was to find some other First and hope they'd reveal the secret.

“When you figure it out, let me know,” Kunsel demanded seriously, no doubt incensed that there was some Shinra-Dumbapple-SOLDIER conspiracy he was unaware of.

“...maybe I’ll just ask Sephiroth,” Zack decided.

Once Sephiroth was back at HQ, he scheduled a training session with Zack, true to his word. Zack, in turn, showed up on time, thoroughly prepared, and eager to learn—both about his progress in general, and the secrets to becoming a true First Class SOLDIER. In fact, the secrets of the program were among his very first questions pelted at Sephiroth, the second Zack entered the Training Room.

The line of questioning, though, apparently caught Sephiroth completely off-guard. “...dumbapples?” Sephiroth, concerningly, echoed in confusion, directing the most openly *baffled* expression at Zack that Zack had ever seen on the man.

Zack crossed his arms slowly, his own confusion growing. “...starting to feel like maybe Angeal was yankin’ my chain,” he observed.

“Far more likely than your promotion being based on your knowledge of obscure fruits,” Sephiroth confirmed, moving on to bring up Zack’s module history on the Training Room’s computer. “There’s certainly no such requirement for Firsts.”

“No weird hazing ritual where you can’t be a First unless you eat a whole bushel, or anything?” Zack scoffed, joking in an attempt to curb the flare of irritation he felt at Angeal’s odd humor.

Guy got on *Zack’s* case for not talking about mission-relevant info, leaving Zack to puzzle over stupid *apples*, just to—

“None that I’m aware of,” Sephiroth huffed, amused, as his eyes roamed over the data. “If there were, I wouldn’t qualify.”

“Can’t eat that many in one sitting?” Zack asked amiably. “With how much I eat as a Second, I would’ve figured a First could handle that. Or, is it the taste?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sephiroth said, a smirk *just* visible between his bangs. “I haven’t tried one.” After a few moments of studying the screen, he somewhat more somberly added, “...I was assured they are excellent. The juice imported to Midgar apparently pales in comparison to eating them fresh off the trees.”

Remember where said juice was imported from, along with the family connection, Zack could only think of one source for that information. “Genesis tell you that?” he guessed.

Sephiroth nodded, silent, his expression hidden. He continued reading over the data, disengaging from the conversation.

To Zack, it was as if Sephiroth was present and accounted for one moment, and then eons away, the very next. To a downright disorienting degree. Zack fidgeted uncomfortably, not knowing what to say. He wanted to crack some other joke, to alleviate the quiet. Get them both at least chuckling again, instead of both being down in the dumps about everything going on. But, the more he tried to think of something funny, the more he second-guessed whether telling jokes at that moment was even appropriate.

How were they supposed to just go about business as usual, when everything was such a mess?

“...that does remind me,” Sephiroth began, shifting only slightly in Zack’s direction. “Lazard wants SOLDIER to investigate Banora.”

“What for?” Zack inquired, perking up.

“I imagine he’ll tell you when he calls you in for a briefing,” Sephiroth said, finally meeting Zack’s gaze again, far more seriously. “It’s your mission, now.”

The phrasing confused Zack. “What do you mean, *now?*”

“It was mine, initially,” Sephiroth explained. “I told Lazard to send you, in my stead.”

“I’m getting one of *your* missions?!” Zack exclaimed. It didn’t make any sense. He wasn’t even a First, yet, and Sephiroth was the one insisting he shouldn’t bite off more than he could chew—

“Yes,” Sephiroth stated, his voice hushed, but low and intense. So much so, that Sephiroth had Zack’s full, worried attention, when he quietly stated, “The expectation will be that if you run into Genesis, or *Angeal*, you will retrieve them by any means necessary.”

“Any…?” Zack repeated, uncomprehending, only to see Sephiroth nod slowly, meaningfully, at the hilt of Zack’s sword. It dawned on Zack, horribly. *Any* means. Including violence.

If he had to beat Genesis—and his own *mentor*—bloody to bring them back, he was *expected* to.

"No," Zack refused unthinkingly, glowering at Sephiroth. "No *way!* I'm not gonna fight them if I don't have to!" he declared, swiping his hand across the air as he did, wholly denying even the possibility that he would raise a hand to the man that had his back for so long—Genesis and his schemes be damned. "I…I can find Angeal first! Talk to him! I'll talk to him, and then he can talk to Genesis!" He shot Sephiroth a defiant glare. "I'm not gonna hurt them—I *won't!*"

Yet, rather than meet Zack's anger with even the slightest frustration, the tension in Sephiroth bled away. A small smirk spread across his lips, inexplicably, as he watched Zack. "My orders for you may differ slightly from Lazard's," he said mysteriously.

Zack's lips parted as he waited for Sephiroth to elaborate, bracing himself for the worst—for having to reckon with the thought that he'd been reading Sephiroth *entirely* wrong, this whole time.

"Use your own judgement to handle the investigation," Sephiroth ordered, "and come back alive."

When the statement hung in the air, the First leaving it at that, Zack let out a long, loud sigh, letting his anxiety go with it. "Man," Zack huffed, "that's it? I was gonna do that anyway."

Sephiroth's smile strengthened as Zack pouted petulantly up at him. "I thought you might," he admitted. "Should anything go awry, leave any fallout with Lazard to me."

Belatedly, it hit Zack that Sephiroth's orders were meant to take unsaid *priority* over Lazard's. Over the Director himself. Zack handling things peacefully with Angeal and Genesis was more important to Sephiroth than the actual mission he was being assigned.

This was Sephiroth's mission, first—he was entrusting Zack with something he couldn't do, in his position.

And suddenly Zack remembered how Sephiroth and Angeal were already at odds, before Angeal left. Remembered the mysterious fight with 'another First,' which wrecked the Training Room. How Sephiroth told Zack that if *Zack* spoke with Angeal, it would likely go better than if Sephiroth did so himself.

The highest chance of success lay with *Zack* going to find Angeal, not

Sephiroth, and Sephiroth wanted him to ignore any orders that could harm his friends.

Emboldened by that realization, Zack nodded, determined to bring Angeal and Genesis back safe and sound. It was falling to him to keep them safe, after all. “Okay,” Zack said, his smile returning. “I’ve got this. You can count on me!”

With that matter settled, Sephiroth turned back to the computer in much better humor. “I see you’ve completed quite the slew of missions while I was gone.”

“Just little stuff,” Zack shrugged. “Mostly around HQ and Midgar, and some simulations. Like, there was one where I fought a VR Ifrit,” he recalled with a grin. “Kicked its butt.”

Sephiroth studied the list from the display, only to frown. “A simulation from Professor Hojo…I see.”

“Oh right. He’s one of the R&D guys, yeah?”

“The department Director, in fact,” Sephiroth elaborated, his brow furrowed when he looked at Zack again. “Did you meet with him?”

“Nope, all emails,” Zack explained, shaking his head. “Why? Should I?”

“No,” Sephiroth stated firmly, his eyes back on the list. “With any luck, you won’t ever have to work with him personally. I’d advise not engaging with him at all, if you don’t have to.”

“But if he works with SOLDIER…?”

“Only when he has new toys he wants to test,” Sephiroth muttered, scrolling down and reading the other mission reports as he spoke. “He may also deign to perform mako exposures for select operatives, but now that those levels have been standardized, you’re better off going to Medical.”

‘Select operatives’ sounded special. Special enough for the resident poster boy in front of Zack to qualify. “Does Hojo do your exposures?” Zack asked.

“Unfortunately,” Sephiroth deadpanned.

Zack made a mental note to thoroughly evaluate any mission he saw

coming from R&D, going forward. If Sephiroth disliked the guy that much, he had to be a pain in the ass. Or, did something specific to deserve so much ire. “What’s his deal?” Zack inquired, crossing his arms over his chest. “He a jerk?”

An amused huff escaped before Sephiroth schooled himself, glancing up at the corner of the ceiling. Then he turned, pressing a few buttons on the keyboard, accessing some controls Zack couldn’t see. “More so a walking mass of complexes,” Sephiroth described. “The less you see of him, the better.”

“Got it,” Zack replied, but even so, couldn’t help but wonder what the scientist was actually like. Sephiroth’s advice wasn’t an outright ban on talking to the guy, or taking R&D missions. So, maybe he would find out as he rose up the ranks.

“I see another Ifrit mission here,” Sephiroth commented.

“Oh, yeah! That one!” Zack beamed as he recognized the information on the display. “I got the actual materia! I’ve been dying to try it out.”

“You could while we wait for you to hit Supernova today,” Sephiroth told him, hitting more keys to access the VR module system instead.

“I can?!”

“I don’t see why not,” Sephiroth smiled warmly, and then indicated Zack should enter the VR room with a quick tilt of his head.

Zack rushed inside, sword already drawn when the virtual fiends sparked to life.

While Zack wanted to use the summon immediately, the epiornis in the virtual field had other plans. All too quickly, Zack was too busy dodging deadly, clawed kicks to his face. The mandrakes were no better, trailing after him on their tiny legs as he ran around to avoid them. It was probably less than impressive to Sephiroth, but as the mandrakes went for his ankles, Zack was more concerned with just how many of the damn things were in the module.

And then, suddenly, he felt a burst of energy from his limit break—only, it wasn’t the surge of strength from Rush Assault, or the spellwork of Supernova.

Instead, Zack felt like this magic was superseding them both, and like there were sparks on the ends of his fingers, begging to be unleashed

in a blaze. So, not wasting time wondering about what his system was up to, Zack turned on the approaching monsters and tapped into the new magic.

All at once, as with any *normal* limit break, Zack instinctively knew exactly what to do. He swung his hand forward, and up, a bright red orb of materia suddenly, solidly in his grasp. A fiery summon circle flared to life, its light radiating across the room until the space was consumed by an altogether different environment.

Ifrit surged from beneath the ground, breaking free of a now treacherous, rocky landscape. The summon landed heavily, flames spurting from the cracks in the earth at the impact. Ifrit brought its clawed hands to its front, only to swiftly lean back in a savage roar, as its magic-borne inferno burned over the summon's body. Engulfed, Ifrit launched itself forward, leaving lines of magma as it tore toward its foes.

The fiends all went up in flames, all felled in an instant.

Its job done, Ifrit vanished, along with the VR particles left over from the monsters' defeat. Zack stood tall, looking around proudly at how quickly he took them down. Sure, it wasn't Supernova, but he learned something very valuable.

Namely, using summons was *fun*.

The door opened, and Sephiroth walked in, but instead of the soft smile of pride Zack was hoping for, the man wore a surprisingly perplexed expression. "Did you not equip Ifrit's materia?" Sephiroth asked, his eyes scanning Zack's weapon. "Why was it in your hand?"

"Oh! Uhh—" Zack started, patting down his pockets to locate the orb. "Yeah, it's—Where did I…?" It wasn't until he checked his back pockets that he found it, thoroughly forgotten. He pulled the materia out for Sephiroth's inspection. "Here it is!"

Sephiroth's eyes flicked from the materia, back to Zack's face, questioningly. "...you used it without equipping it," he concluded.

The intensity of the gaze told Zack he screwed up somewhere. "Is…is that not how to use summons?" he asked, recalling his first fight with Ifrit, where the materia was charged and left on its lonesome, in the woods.

"Not typically, no," Sephiroth confirmed, frowning at the materia.

“They don’t spontaneously appear in hand like that, either.”

Zack frowned at it, too, now just as confused, examining the gentle red glow as if the secrets of the summon would spell themselves out on the orb’s surface. He didn’t feel strange using it—Quite the opposite, in fact. It felt natural. Even more so than magic or command materia. He didn’t even have to concentrate his mana into—

…weren’t summons *supposed* to use mana?

“Ifrit…has a mana cost, right?” Zack checked, confirming his sneaking suspicion when Sephiroth nodded.

“A minimal one for a summon, but yes. Numerically around the low thirties, generally.”

Zack let out a short, uneasy hum, eyeing the materia again. “...didn’t have one for me,” he muttered. “My no mana cost buff wasn’t active, either…” When he looked up again, he expected frustration. Almost expected Sephiroth to get aggravated with the nonsensicality of it, because *why* in the world would *this* be different for Zack, too?

Even if it *felt* normal to him, clearly it wasn’t.

“It just…felt like using a limit break,” Zack summarized lamely, growing increasingly nervous as Sephiroth’s brow furrowed that much further.

Yet, ultimately, Sephiroth only shut his eyes and let out a quiet sigh. “...so, your limit system also incorporates summons, so long as you have the materia on your person,” he concluded. He seemed to ignore Zack’s awkward, affirmative hum, busying himself with pulling his PHS from his pocket. Sephiroth pressed buttons nonchalantly, though nothing happened with anything in the VR.

“What are you doing?” Zack couldn’t help but ask, nervous.

“I’ve taken to writing up a digital record to keep track of your limit system’s intricacies,” Sephiroth revealed idly, still pressing keys—typing notes, Zack realized. “Did you notice any difference between the summon and your usual breaks?”

“Not really. I guess it kinda felt like it…switched modes or something, maybe,” Zack described, relaxing. Once more, Sephiroth only seemed to care about figuring out the mystery that was *Zack*, rather than how to force Zack’s system to behave. It put Zack at ease, like he could

stop worrying so much about why it wasn't normal, and focus instead on giving Sephiroth as much data to work with as possible. "It just kinda came over me," Zack elaborated, in the hopes that it would help. "Like…a wave, or something, in my head."

"Mind waves," Sephiroth scoffed quietly, though not unkindly, as he directed an amused smirk at Zack. "Is that what I should title this file? 'Mind Wave System?'"

"*Ooh*," Zack uttered, already elated with the idea. "Yeah, like a…Like a Digital Mind Wave!" Raising his fists in excitement, he realized, "That's it! That's what we can call my limit break! My DMW!"

Sephiroth chuckled. "Alright," he said, adding it to the record, "Digital Mind Wave, it is."

Zack beamed, grateful that, despite the mess that was SOLDIER, at the moment, *something* in his life was finally starting to go smoothly.

Bewildered by Banora

Chapter Summary

> Zack returns from the Banora mission, attempting to navigate the harshness of reality.

Chapter Notes

> I realize the pacing might be a little janky from outright skipping the Banora mission, but it was another 'not enough changes in canon to be worth a write up' section. Felt it'd probably be too boring (and long!!) with no divergences, so rather than having the Banora mission in its entirety, I've decided to skip it and go with the angle of: Zack now tries to process what the FUCK he just went through. Hoping I managed to cover the events of the mission decently despite the skip lol CC is so action-focused (bc...video game lol) and I wanted to give Zack some time to deal with the actual emotions!

Banora was supposed to be a simple mission.

Even with Sephiroth's—and now Tseng's—warning, Zack figured the mission as a whole would be straightforward. Once Zack talked to Angeal, it was supposed to be smooth sailing. Angeal could stop Genesis's nefarious schemes, and they would all go back to HQ That was the plan: Everyone would come home, and life would go back to normal.

Only, as Zack watched Banora burn from the window of their helicopter, he was left reeling at how the horrors he faced were becoming the *new* normal.

"Try not to dwell on it," Tseng advised from his seat, even if Zack knew the inscrutable man was upset with how things turned out, too. He must be. Tseng was the one who found dead teammates in the same grave as Genesis's slain parents, after all.

"We're really just…" Zack trailed off, eyes still on the fires, even as the distance between them and Banora grew to where he could only see tiny sparks on the horizon. "We burned it all to the ground," he uttered hopelessly, unable to wrap his brain around it.

"Company policy," Tseng reminded him, before fiddling with his

seatbelt—readjusting it to not touch where Genesis blasted him with Fire.

Zack eventually tore his eyes away from the window, staring blankly ahead, at the cockpit. The Security Officers tasked with flying them back to Midgar were quiet, all business. Like this was no surprise. Like it really was routine.

Nothing about this mission was routine, as far as Zack was concerned.

The flight back was silent, leaving everyone to their own thoughts. Their own exhausted, spinning, incomprehensible thoughts, in Zack's case. He kept repeating each minute in his mind, as if he could understand it if he just went over what happened again. And again. And *again.*

Yet, more and more, his mind kept getting stuck on Angeal, when he claimed, "*My mother…could not continue to live. And neither can her son.*"

Those words echoed in his ears, even over the loudness of helicopter blades when they touched back down at HQ. He dimly registered Tseng mentioning the Turks would discuss things with Lazard, so there was no rush on a debrief. All that was left for him to do was head home. He did, mechanically, the late hour meaning almost everyone was out of the building already. The walk back to his apartment was a lonely one.

By the time he made it inside, the loneliness felt more like abandonment.

Because, that's what it was, wasn't it? It was the only conclusion that made any sense. Angeal walked away from him. No explanation. No words of comfort, no sympathy. Just walked right out of his life. Not just the one time in Wutai, either. Twice more, on this very mission.

Third time was the goddamn *charm*, wasn't it?

Zack tossed his key and wallet on the nearest side table, quickly finding he still had Genesis's Bahamut materia. He took it out, too, glowering at the orb before tossing it on the table with the rest of his things, and then made a mental note to turn the thing in tomorrow.

As he went to roughly toe his boots off, the second boot whacked into the table. His wallet fell off and onto the floor with a flat *smack*, and the materia followed it, proceeding to roll further into the living

room, and under the coffee table. Zack stood still, glaring, too infuriated at both offending objects to retrieve them.

“To hell with this,” he muttered, ignoring the mess and storming to his room.

With no idea when Kunsel would be back, Zack figured he was alone for the time being. Even if Kunsel *was* home, the mission was highly confidential—he wouldn’t be able to run the details by Kunsel to help make sense of it anyway.

So, it was with a bitter gait that Zack beelined for his shower, removing and tossing armor haphazardly as he went. Before he stripped entirely, he realized he forgot to remove his PHS from his pocket. He flicked on the light of the bathroom as he stared at the device, debating.

Sephiroth might be too busy for a call. He was also, however, the only one Zack could talk to about Banora. The only one who had the clearance to know, and who would understand the specifics—and, *maybe*, Sephiroth would have a better idea of what the hell Angeal was thinking.

Zack hit the call button, and soon enough the line was ringing. It rang. And rang. By the time the voice mail message kicked in, Zack hung up, disheartened. Sephiroth might have his PHS set to emergency lines only. Or on silent. Or, depending on where he was, the guy might be *asleep*, for all Zack knew.

Opting to text, instead, Zack kept his message short.

Mission went to shit. They got away. Can we talk?

He waited for a few moments after the message confirmed it was sent. When there was no indication it was even seen, Zack gave up. Sephiroth must be busy. Or asleep. Nothing for it.

The water was blessedly hot when he finally got into the shower, but it stung his injuries. Reminded him of what he just went through. He thought it wouldn’t come to fighting. Thought, at worst, he might fight a few monsters—a couple of Genesis copies. Instead he fought a whole crew of cohorts. Mutated guard hounds rushing out of the homes of the townsfolk, eager to sink their teeth into their next victim.

Zack squeezed his eyes shut against the spray, trying to banish the

thought of the dark interiors of those houses, and the sharp smell of blood and rot from within them. Instead, he unwillingly recalled the shoddy, shallow graves of Genesis's parents, and the Turks sent to question them. Recalled the sight of Gillian Hewley, dead on the floor, as her son stood by and scowled in condemnation.

"How could you condone any of that, Angeal…?" Zack wondered quietly, his face screwing up with agony. He rubbed his hands over his eyes, covering them as the water pelted his head.

What's honorable about killing your own mother…?!

No answers came then, and none would come now—Zack just had to *cope*. Somehow.

He was toweled off and dressed by the time he really registered he finished showering. Everything felt blurry. Off-kilter. Every move felt like trying to fight against a Slow spell, regardless of how quick he was.

It was only when the front door unlocked that the fog lifted a little.

"Zack?" Kunsel called from the living room, curious and concerned all at once, no doubt from seeing the mess of belongings.

Zack exited his room, initially intending to smile and greet his roommate, as normal, only to falter and wordlessly wince when he met Kunsel's gaze.

Immediately, Kunsel's shoulders slumped, as he took in Zack's miserable face. "Oh, buddy," he muttered sympathetically. "Mission not go well?"

Zack's jaw clenched on all the words he wanted to say. All the secrets he wanted to spill, just to have someone else help him make sense of it all. He could only shake his head.

"One sec," Kunsel said, taking off his pauldrons. He left them on the kitchen counter before turning to Zack again, arms open. "C'mere, man."

Trudging into Kunsel's embrace, Zack dropped his head onto Kunsel's shoulder as his friend wrapped him up in a tight hug. Tears burned Zack's eyelids, threatening to fall, and he mumbled, "Mission was *shit*."

“This one was pretty important, too,” Kunsel noted quietly, giving Zack another squeeze before loosening his hold. He patted Zack’s shoulder in his attempt to comfort. “Sorry, Zack. How about a night in?”

“...can we watch a movie?” Zack suggested, eager for literally anything to get his mind off the echoing lines of Loveless haunting his brain.

“Sure can,” Kunsel agreed brightly. “You pick some comfy feel-good thing, and I’ll watch it with you, no matter how cheesy.” Then, with a grin, he added, “Even if it’s *Stamp and the Hidden Treasure.*”

Zack scoffed, mildly amused, tempted to pick that very movie. It *did* count as a feel-good film. Just a silly old classic about a silly little pup —

“Are you Zack,” he recalled Gillian Hewley ask, “*the puppy?”*

Stomach flipping, along with his mood, Zack forced himself over to the TV to pick something else. Anything else. Whatever *wouldn’t* remind him of his first and final conversation with Angeal’s mother.

It wasn’t long before he and Kunsel were cooped up on the couch, snacks in hand, both sprawling from opposite ends. Kunsel made a bowl of popcorn for each of them, opting to sidestep any arguments about butter to salt ratios.

With the movie starting, Zack tried to focus on what was in front of him. Saturated, cartoony colors filled the screen, with upbeat music dancing joyfully through their little apartment. An excited moogle hopped into frame, narrating a story Zack knew and loved since childhood.

He clung to those old feelings, yet they slipped through his thoughts like drops of water, his mind pulled again and again into the gravity of his situation.

Despite Kunsel kindly prodding Zack to eventually get some sleep, not much sleep was actually managed. Zack glowered at his window as the sun rose, the light just beginning to peek annoyingly through the gaps in the blinds. A new day meant new orders. Meant he would have to get up and face reality again.

It meant Angeal really *wasn’t* coming back.

Zack squeezed his eyes shut, covering his face to mope a little longer. It was still too early to get up. Even with his stomach complaining at him, painful and nauseous with its own emptiness.

Then, suddenly, his PHS beeped.

Wondering who the hell could be up and sending him messages at this hour, Zack quickly retrieved the device from his bedside table. Squinting at the brightness of the screen, he saw only one notification —a text, from Sephiroth.

A reply to Zack's question from last night, saying they could meet today, at the Data Room.

…*where's the Data Room?* Zack wondered. He also wondered what time he was supposed to get there. Texting back exactly those questions, Zack expected he wouldn't get a reply for a while— Sephiroth had surely just gotten up. There would be plenty of time to be miserable in bed for a few more minutes, before getting ready to go —

Except, Sephiroth responded immediately.

I'll be there until noon, read the reply. You can stop by whenever you're free.

Zack was far too free for his own liking, so when Sephiroth followed up with the directions to get there, Zack sluggishly scooted himself out of bed. He might be *too* early and arrive long before Sephiroth, but Zack didn't see any reason to delay. Either he would be sad in his apartment, or he'd be sad at HQ. At least at HQ he could pretend his moping was somewhat productive.

After a quick breakfast, Zack departed for the Data Room. It was deceptively easy to find. The snag, however, was a security check on the way to the door. Zack was instructed to leave his PHS and materia with the guard. No weapons, either. Zack complied, albeit confusedly, wondering what kind of data Sephiroth wanted to sift through that could require so much red tape.

When Zack entered, he was instantly overwhelmed by the sheer *number* of stacks throughout the room. Shelves upon shelves of books and boxes, and binders full of who-knows-what, were all piled high and close together. He couldn't even see the back wall, just what appeared to be an expanse of jam-packed rows of *stuff.* A singular, ancient-looking computer sat to his left, which he assumed was as an

antiquated search system for navigating the veritable maze of papers.

A few small tables were set up to his right, and it was there that he spotted Sephiroth, surrounded by documentation.

“There you are,” Zack observed, in lieu of greeting.

Sephiroth lifted his eyes from the binder in his hands, his gaze softening when he spotted Zack. “Morning,” he replied, his voice rumbling like he had been sleeping moments before.

Frowning concernedly at the dark circles under Sephiroth’s eyes, Zack approached the table. “You’re here early,” he noted, surprised.

“As are you,” Sephiroth countered, though not unkindly, as he placed the binder he was holding on the table. He gestured for Zack to take a seat across from him. As Zack did, Sephiroth said, “Apologies for not replying sooner. I was here most of the night with no access to my PHS.”

Zack slid into the chair, taking in the tired slope of Sephiroth’s shoulders with even more concern. “And you came right back in the morning?” he questioned.

Sephiroth merely smirked, shaking his head, his gaze falling back to the piles of books and binders around him.

“Wait, did you stay *here* all night?!” Zack asked, aghast as Sephiroth shrugged in response.

“Insomnia,” Sephiroth explained. “Not a rare occurrence, in my case.” Then, he took on a more serious expression. Steely-eyed, as if bracing himself. “You wanted to discuss what happened in Banora.”

Zack deflated in an instant, too tired and stressed to keep his face from crumbling as the memories all rushed to the forefront again. “It was bad,” he managed to mutter. “Really, *really* bad.”

Sephiroth was quiet for a moment, shifting only to cross his arms over his chest, frustration on his face. “...Lazard informed me of some of the details,” he revealed. “Namely, that Genesis murdered most of the town.”

“Yeah,” Zack confirmed miserably, grimacing at the table. “Including his own parents.”

"...and, Angeal?"

"Stopped us from fighting, at first," Zack described, recalling the intervention wasn't quick enough to keep Tseng from getting injured. Genesis's magic was certainly powerful, Zack could tell, but he couldn't get a good read on it with all the interruptions that happened. Especially not after Gillian— "He…I think Angeal might've killed his mom," Zack uttered, the words burning like bile on his tongue.

"He *what?*" Sephiroth questioned, and when Zack looked up to find Sephiroth staring at him with abject horror.

"I walked into the house and she was…" Zack winced, shutting his eyes, only to quickly open them again to banish the mental image of Gillian Hewley, sprawled lifelessly on the floor. "...she was dead. Angeal was just standing there, staring at her," Zack continued, his fists clenching in his lap. The fury and betrayal he felt in that moment flared right back up again. A punch to Angeal's face wasn't *remotely* enough for all that happened. "Said something about 'my mother couldn't continue to live, and neither can her son.'"

He heard Sephiroth sigh heavily. A long silence stretched between them, as Sephiroth processed the new information, and Zack deliberated on what else he could discuss.

So much happened, and Zack wanted to get it off his chest, but now that the words were tumbling out of him, everything felt so *hopeless*.

"That seems highly out of character," Sephiroth eventually muttered, "...but, then, I didn't expect Genesis to kill innocent people so brazenly, either."

"None of this makes any *sense*," Zack complained, glowering when he met Sephiroth's gaze. "Angeal barely even *looked* at me! And Genesis just spouted a bunch of Loveless and pit me against Bahamut! What the hell are they thinking?!"

"I wish I knew," Sephiroth said, and then gestured tiredly at the documents on the table. "I've been looking into the copy tech. It didn't work until now, with Genesis—I still need to locate the papers those findings are citing."

"Guy gets used for copy tech, and the first thing he does with it is make his own army of cronies?" Zack summarized bitterly.

Sephiroth glared at the binders and papers, but he didn't answer. He clearly had no answers, much to their mutual frustration. At length, Sephiroth rubbed his eyes one-handed, and quietly uttered, "Perhaps I should have been on the mission, after all…"

The very thought sent ice through Zack's veins. Sephiroth would have had to fight them, had that been the case. It would have been inevitable—Genesis *wanted* to fight Sephiroth, if the man lamenting Sephiroth's absence was any indication. Zack, he couldn't care less about, but Sephiroth?

Sephiroth he saw as *worth* fighting, not just throwing against a summon like he did Zack.

Nothing good would have come of Sephiroth going. The whole *point* of Zack taking the mission in his stead was to keep the bloodshed to a minimum—to bring everyone back home. To bring Sephiroth's *only friends*, according to Tseng, *back*—

…which Zack failed to do, entirely.

Crestfallen, Zack slumped in his chair. "…'m sorry," he mumbled.

There was a pause, only for Sephiroth to confusedly ask, "What do you mean?"

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Zack reminded him. "I'm—That's *why* you sent me, and I…I messed up."

Sephiroth, to his surprise, scoffed. "Hardly your fault, considering Genesis and Angeal's behavior."

While Sephiroth wasn't wrong, the sentiment didn't make Zack feel any better. In fact, he felt a bit worse, remembering how Genesis merely *tripped* him, rather than fighting him fairly. Mocked Zack, relentlessly. Zack wouldn't have been able to bring him, or Angeal, back to HQ—even by force. He wasn't strong enough. He was just some silly nobody of a Second, compared to two veteran Firsts.

Zero attention span, restless as a little puppy, according to Angeal's description, in his letter to Gillian.

Zack scowled. If Angeal said as much to his mother, he probably told others. Told his friends, at least. Zack glanced up again, finding Sephiroth thinking pensively—or, exhaustedly. The glazed look in his eyes made the man seem worlds away, and Zack couldn't help but try

to snag his attention back, even as irritated as he was. “Did Angeal ever call me a ‘puppy’ around you?”

The question had its intended effect, snapping Sephiroth back to alertness. “Hm? …ah,” he started, looking off to the side as he recalled something. “He did joke about it, in passing. Why?”

With that confirmation, Zack felt that much more aggravated. “Apparently, he also told his *mom*,” Zack groused, waving his hand irritatedly with the words. “Both him *and* Genesis completely brushed me off like I was one, too. Like I was just some dumb *kid* they didn’t need to bother talking to.” He slouched even more aggressively in his chair, his mind a mess of confusion and anger, all jumbled together.

If he was older, or a First, maybe it would have made sense—maybe they would have taken him seriously, but that shouldn’t have mattered.

“It’s stupid,” Zack grumbled. “It’s not *fair*. I know I’m still a Second, but I’m not *Stamp*, I’m a *SOLDIER operative*.”

Sephiroth was quiet, until there was a break in the complaints. “If it’s any consolation,” he said, “I don’t think Angeal meant it that way.”

“…I know,” Zack admitted, albeit grouchily. “Just rubs me really wrong, right now.” As Sephiroth stared at him, Zack got the sense of being thought over as a puzzle, once more. Like how Sephiroth would try to piece the DMW’s intricacies together—attempting to understand better.

At length, Sephiroth softened, a small smile on his lips. “You’re still learning. Even the most well-trained puppies have to learn as they grow.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Zack snapped, waving to dismiss the statement.

“Do you?” Sephiroth challenged. “Because there are many different types to consider, as well—’puppy’ can refer to the young of any canine. You’re the one who will have to determine which of those you most resemble, Stamp or otherwise.”

That statement piqued Zack’s interest. He didn’t have to be some goofy little cartoon dog. Zack furrowed his brow at Sephiroth, unsure if he was being teased. “So, what, like I can decide I’m a badass wolf or something, instead?”

Despite the amused glint in Sephiroth's eyes, he didn't appear to be teasing. He considered Zack seriously, even as he started moving through a few of the documents to pick a new one to research. "Wolves are specialized hunters with strong social bonds, when it comes to their pack," Sephiroth said thoughtfully. "I can see the resemblance."

Zack brightened. "...I like the sound of that."

"The social bonds seem especially fitting, considering how easily you make friends," Sephiroth added, "and the connection to your limit break."

"Yeah—Oh! That reminds me!" Zack sat up excitedly, finally remembering one of the few *good* things that happened during the Banora mission. "I got a new one from Tseng!"

"And so, the pack grows," Sephiroth joked idly.

Zack chuckled, though it soon bubbled into an outright laugh at the very notion. Him, a powerful wolf of a SOLDIER—still growing, sure, but no less threatening. His friends as his pack, interconnected and reliable.

Being a puppy was sounding a little less annoying, the more he considered that angle.

"Any issues with the new break?" Sephiroth inquired.

"Nope. Works exactly the way it should, according to Tseng," Zack reported. "So…still just Supernova that's wonky, I guess."

"See if you hit it in the coming weeks, and if it's the same. There are a few other options we could try."

"And…Angeal and Genesis?" Zack prompted worriedly.

"With so little to go on, we likely won't be able to make a move until they do," Sephiroth concluded with a sigh. "...if they do. For now, I'll see what else I can find regarding the copy tech, and its connection to Genesis."

"Let me know if you hear anything from Lazard, too, yeah?" Zack said, even as he sensed their conversation was wrapping up. He didn't know what time it was, but it had to be around time for him to report in. Taking another glance at Sephiroth's dark circles, Zack added,

“And…*try* to get some sleep.”

Sephiroth let out an amused huff. “*One* of those, I can assure you I will do,” he stated. Then, as Zack guessed he might, followed up with, “You should probably get going. I expect you still have a report to write.”

“Yeah,” Zack sighed, though it felt lighter than it did earlier, even as he made the effort to stand. “Good luck with the research.”

“Appreciated.”

Walking to the exit, Zack only made it halfway to the door before he hesitated, casting one more glance back at Sephiroth. Sephiroth, who, if what Tseng said was accurate, was simply continuing to work, even with his only friends at large. Ready to fight against him—his only friends turned *enemies*, from the way they were acting. Didn’t tell Sephiroth so much as *goodbye*.

And now, here he was, despite all of that, trying to figure out what went wrong…alone.

It didn’t sit right with Zack. No other Firsts were as close to Sephiroth, but not for long. Zack would change that. Especially once he made First, himself.

“Hey, Sephiroth?” Zack spoke up, gently grinning when Sephiroth looked up. “Thanks. Glad I’ve got you in my ‘pack.’”

Sephiroth appeared momentarily surprised by the sentiment, but soon smiled again. He inclined his head to Zack, and then got right back to his reading. The smile remained, Zack noted happily, even as Zack walked out the door.

Conniving Creeps

Chapter Summary

> Zack keeps busy in an attempt to distract himself from the goings-on, but the threats to his normality are closer than he thinks.

Chapter Notes

> Hope everyone's having a good weekend! :D I've been having fun figuring out ways to tie some of the CC missions into this fic lol

Zack read over the mission parameters on his PHS again. Shinra freight carrier sank off the coast of Mideel. Cargo drifted to a deserted island. Goal: Retrieve it before anti-Shinra elements do.

It was so straightforward, Zack was bored just reading it.

This mission was a cinch for someone in SOLDIER. Or, it should be. Glancing next to him, Zack noticed the Third Class operative he was assisting was still absurdly nervous, the man's leg bouncing erratically as they waited for their helicopter to land.

He's not even the one doing the mission, Zack thought, a little more worried for the guy now, compared to when he first volunteered. The plan was, on paper, that the Third was the one completing the orders, while Zack was just here to observe. In actuality, Zack was doing the whole kit and caboodle. It felt necessary, after watching the Third get chewed out by his superior. The guy was just too wishy-washy and anxious—even for the most routine of missions. One Security alone could probably handle themselves.

…and, Zack belatedly realized, Zack forgot to ask the poor guy his *name*.

It would be far too awkward to ask now. Zack was pretty sure he could manage. The priority was helping the guy get over his nerves—hopefully he'd learn something, and drop what his name was… eventually.

Once they landed, Zack led the Third into the rockier parts of the island, promising, "There's nothing to worry about!" and instructing, "Just watch what I do."

"I'll try my best…" the Third mumbled pessimistically.

Zack frowned deeply at the total lack of confidence. Doing the mission for him was one thing—Angeal used to do it for Zack, to show him the ropes, after all. Confidence, though, Zack didn't know if he could teach. But, after seeing Angeal in action, Zack picked up plenty of techniques and strategies just from mimicking his mentor. Surely this guy could do the same, watching Zack.

As Zack kept walking, keeping an eye out for local fiends, he did wonder if he ever came across *this* unsure of himself, though.

He remembered getting critiques when he was a Third, as short as his time was in that rank. Confidence was something he had in spades. His critiques were more centered around being scatterbrained. *Too* eager. And loud. And brash. Naive.

…they still stung, if he was honest.

Zack took a breath, refocusing on the task at hand. Remembering all the complaints of his teachers wasn't going to help *him* teach. Besides, after Zack met Angeal, he improved.

…his lack of focus might still be an issue, but hey, Sephiroth was helping him with that.

Having done so many solo missions around Midgar up until this point, though, it felt odd to hear the Third's boots crunching the sand and dirt behind him. Zack scanned the scenery, eyes roaming over the massive green ferns and towering palm trees. Did he have to explain why he was looking around to the Third? That had to be common sense, right? Checking for fiends? The guy was shadowing Zack, so he must be aware of what Zack was doing.

Angeal led by example, most of the time, Zack recalled. Angeal would have known what to do. What to say. Whether to say anything at all.

But, thinking more on how Angeal would have handled this mission—or whether he'd be proud of Zack, for more or less following in his mentoring footsteps—Zack couldn't help but remember the sight of him walking away. Of him leaving Zack behind.

This mission was supposed to be a *distraction* from all that, but taking on the role of mentor might have the opposite effect, in retrospect.

It hurt to think about. All that talk about upping Zack's levels for promotion, just to ditch. All the talks about dreams, and honor just to give it all up. So much time helping and inspiring so many other

SOLDIER operatives, and Angeal just *deserted*.

Zack clenched his jaw, trying once again to just *focus*. He couldn't deal with this. He was going to completely ignore the reminders of Angeal. He wasn't even going to *think* about it.

It was at that moment that a blessed distraction came in the form of movement up ahead. A disturbed fern, shaking as something moved through the dense foliage. The sound of something approaching, hacking its way through, closer, and closer.

Zack zeroed in on the noise, halting and signaling for the Third behind him to stop, too.

And then, to Zack's horror, a G Assassin walked out in front of them.

His brain ground to a halt, instantly filled with memories of fighting copies in Banora. Of his mad dash back to the village proper, to get out before the place got fully firebombed. Of dead townsfolk, of Gilian Hewley—

Zack charged at the copy, just as a second stepped into view. He slashed ruthlessly at the first, sword slamming against the copy's curved knives before he knocked it off balance. All of a sudden there was a chill in the air around him, and he glanced at the other foe, spotting wisps of mana as it cast. Zack darted to the side, a Blizzard crashing to the ground where he once stood, and then rapidly brought his sword back up to parry an incoming knife throw.

These damned *copies* shouldn't even *be* here—unless, that was what the brief meant by 'anti-Shinra elements.'

So, Genesis was up to something, clearly. The thought of it brought all the hurt he was trying not to remember right back to the forefront, and Zack threw all his weight into his next blow. The Assassin before him stumbled, but soon flipped out of reach, infuriatingly.

Its expression was blank, but under that mask Zack knew it looked just like Genesis. Had the same jawline. Could wear the same, insufferable, condescending smirk.

The emotions roiling inside him were so all-encompassing, Zack missed a second cast of Blizzard, the spell painfully colliding with his head. He winced, and shook it off, glowering at his opponents as he remembered they did nothing to Angeal—They ignored him. And Angeal just let them wreak havoc on his own *hometown*—

By the time his limit break surged, Zack was positive it had to be Rush Assault, but instead he felt magic—Supernova, for the first time in weeks.

Zack activated the spell unthinkingly, and as usual, he felt the force of the magic moving too quickly for him to fully stop. Weirdly, rather than the blast immediately bursting forth, he got the sense that it was boiling up inside. Like he was taking that that energy and hurling it outward, away from himself, not caring what it did so long as it hit its targets.

He didn't bother trying to control it, flinging the full force of Supernova at the copies.

When the spell finished, he saw the G Assassins oddly *weren't* blown to smithereens. Both copies were still standing, in fact, even if they wobbled. Then they both stumbled, crashing to the ground and landing limp, like they passed out.

Staring at the nearest, Zack noticed it was still breathing. It wasn't defeated, let alone dead. It was *asleep*.

Somehow, Zack managed to trigger one of Supernova's status effects.

The result was so surprising, Zack faltered, unsure how to proceed. Did he just finally get it *right?* Out of *nowhere?* Why? *How?*

Fumbling with Libra to check, Zack couldn't comprehend the scan. All the status effects were there, successfully. Some HP remained, but Zack didn't know how much was from his earlier attacks. Whether it was fractional, like Sephiroth said it should be.

And Sephiroth—there was no way he could have predicted *this* outcome.

Zack knew his DMW was random, but this was pushing it. There had to be some reason it worked this time, and not the others. It *was* tied to his emotions, and he was upset about Angeal, but…he'd been upset about Angeal for months. Supernova never manifested like *this* before.

Once again, Zack found himself wondering, "What the *hell* is going on…?"

The Third emerged from his hiding spot among the ferns, asking, "Is something wrong?"

Zack snapped to attention, having entirely forgotten the man was there. “Totally fine!” he lied. “Guess we found one of those ‘anti-Shinra elements’ we were worried about.” Seeing that the explanation seemed to suffice for the awkward Third, Zack hurried to find his bearings again. He was supposed to be an example of an operative with his shit together, which he very much was *not*, right now. Grinning, hoping his unease wasn’t apparent on his face, he gestured for the Third to follow as he courageously led the way, finishing off the copies with quick blasts of Fire as he went.

This mission was only supposed to be about supply retrieval, after all. Zack would just note the copies’ presence in the report. He was pretty sure all the stuff with Genesis was too highly classified to explain to this Third.

The rest of the mission went smoothly, even with the two malfunctioning Heligunners they ran across. Zack dispatched them with ease, and a flourish. The only things between them and their target were a non-issue, now.

The Third ran out with a bright smile on his face, after the last battle. “Thank you so much, Zack!” he exclaimed. “That was amazing! I learned so much from you!”

Zack honestly didn’t know *what* he taught the guy, considering they really hadn’t spoken much, but if he was happy, so was Zack. “Hey, that’s the spirit!” Zack cheered, grinning right back at the Third. “So, you’re ready to take on the next mission by yourself?”

The Third instantly deflated. “...Hmm, well, knowing how I am, I’ll probably screw something up again…” he muttered. Then, hanging his head, he added, “Maybe I should write to Ma and Pa back home. Tell them how cold city life can be…”

“Ahhh, fine!” Zack interrupted, unable to bear hearing any more defeatism. “I’ll do your next mission too!”

“You will?!”

Once more, Zack wondered if he ever acted similarly toward Angeal. Or, toward Sephiroth, for that matter. This whole mentoring thing was shaping up to be a lot tougher, and a lot more tiring than he bargained for.

Zack groaned softly to himself, already regretting this agreement, but he knew full well that he—much like this Third—was just going to

have to soldier on.

Making sure to include notes about the G Assassins he ran across, Zack submitted his report in record time. He received the typical response, thanking him for its completion—one he suspected might be auto-generated. No follow up from Lazard. Zack didn't understand it, considering the clear evidence that Genesis was up to something, but there wasn't much he could do without orders.

So, Zack decided to just not give himself enough time to worry about any of it.

A few more days passed after helping the Third, and Zack kept himself as busy as possible. Or, tried to, anyway. He also absolutely did *not* let Kunsel know about how he completed someone else's mission—Kunsel would never let him hear the end of it. He wasn't taking on others' caseloads just out of boredom, though, like he was certain Kunsel would suspect. He only wanted to focus on his duty, and he was too restless to wait around for his own assignments to pile in.

Yet, even after running errand missions for SOLDIER's Materia Department, too, Zack was still on edge.

He didn't want to *think*. If he did, his thoughts always drifted back to Angeal. If Zack kept busy—so busy he didn't have *time* to think about his mentor—then everything hurt a little bit less.

After so much busywork, though, his well of missions needing completion was quickly running dry. As the materia developer before him gave profuse thanks for the latest mako stone Zack retrieved, Zack inwardly panicked, wracking his brain for who else he could hit up for work. "Any other mako stones I should look for?" he asked hopefully.

The scientist, to Zack's dismay, shook his head. "Not as of yet, but trust me, you'll be the first to know." He smiled gratefully at Zack. "You've been such a huge help. Thank you."

Zack gave him a nod and a grin, and then headed out, biting down his disappointment. He was rapidly running out of things to do. He might have to settle for Supernova testing again—not that he'd been able to recreate the status effects. Though, just as he looked up to walk in the direction of the Training Room, he noticed there was a Security Officer in front of it, standing guard.

Before Zack could question the man's presence, his PHS rang.

Drawing the device out of his pocket, Zack brightened the second he saw the caller ID. He picked up the call with an elated, "Heya, Sephiroth!"

"*Zack,*" Sephiroth acknowledged smoothly. "*It's been a while.*"

"Figured I wasn't gonna hear from you 'til you got back," Zack noted in agreement, moving over to the lounge area. "What's up?"

"*Lazard sent a message about more Genesis copies being sighted stealing Shinra technology,*" Sephiroth explained. "*He also mentioned you've run across them, yourself.*"

"Oh. Well…yeah," Zack admitted, glancing around to check if the people meandering about the SOLDIER Floor had high enough clearance for this conversation. The more Seconds and Thirds he saw, though, the more he figured he might have to duck into a conference room somewhere, unless he was careful. "Didn't swipe anything with me there, though," he continued vaguely.

Sephiroth chuckled. "*No, I expect not.*"

"So…why call me, then?"

"*Somewhat more secure than detailing anything you found in an email,*" Sephiroth answered. Then he paused. Just when Zack was about to prompt him for more clarification, Sephiroth awkwardly added, "*…and, to check in with you, I suppose.*"

Now with his own stint of mentoring under his belt, Zack felt a surge of happiness at the effort. Sephiroth didn't mentor anyone else, after all—he was probably figuring it out as he went, too. "Appreciate it," Zack told him warmly. "I, uh…I didn't find anything during the mission, really," he admitted, glancing around again. Though, now that he had Sephiroth on the line, he quickly recalled, "Oh! I did get status effects with Supernova the other day!"

"*You did? How?*"

"I have…*no* idea."

"*Did you check your opponent's stats?*"

"Yeah, I ran Libra on it," Zack explained, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand as he tried to remember exactly what the stats said. "Had all three effects. It only had a couple hundred HP left, so—"

Sephiroth hummed frustratedly before Zack could finish.

"...that's no good?" Zack inquired, frowning as he began to pace around the couches in the lounge. "I thought you said the damage should just be fractional?"

"*Fractional in how it deals the damage,*" Sephiroth clarified, "*but, overall, the opponent should only have one hit point remaining.*"

"One?!" Zack repeated, aghast. "Even if it's got like, a million HP?!"

"*I haven't fought anything quite that powerful*," Sephiroth scoffed, amused. "*In every other case, though, yes*."

Zack let out an annoyed grunt, thinking. So, he still hadn't gotten it right, even with the status effects. Or, another option: "Maybe I *only* got the status effects…?"

There was silence as Sephiroth pondered the possibility. "*That would be impressive*," he eventually stated.

Wracking his brain, Zack attempted to recall what emotions were coming up during the fight, apart from being upset about Angeal. If it was all emotion-based, there had to be some clue there. "I guess it did feel more like…flinging it out of me, instead of casting magic, if that makes sense?"

"*...Elaborate.*"

"Like, I didn't care about where it went, or how it worked. I just wanted it *out*," Zack explained, despite being positive the information probably wasn't the least bit helpful.

Yet, surprisingly, Sephiroth replied, "*...I see*," with such seriousness, he must have thought of something. "*I—"*

A monstrous roar came from Sephiroth's end of the line, interrupting them both.

"*—have to go,*" Sephiroth finished sternly, and Zack could clearly imagine him preparing for battle from the tone of his voice alone.

"Yeah, talk later," Zack said quickly. "Kick that monster's butt!"

The cheer earned him another chuckle. "*See you soon,*" Sephiroth said, and then promptly hung up.

With nothing else to do, Zack's gaze was once again drawn to the Training Room. He wanted to double-check his theory that the status effects relied on a different method of casting, but the VR was occupied, he was out of luck. Generally, when the VR *was* in use, there wasn't a guard stationed out front, though. Something was up.

Zack made his way over, greeting the Security Officer with a wave.

Immediately, the officer very authoritatively declared, "The Training Room is currently being used for top-secret research. Hence, entry is strictly prohibited. It is off-limits even for you, Mr. SOLDIER." Then, as Zack stared at him, confused by the outburst, he more sheepishly continued, "...But I, coward that I am, cannot muster the courage to enforce this prohibition."

Zack tried and failed to hold back an amused snort.

"Thus, whether you enter or not will be up to you," the officer announced, once again with blustering bravado, "...and your conscience!"

"Right…" Zack laughed, nearly about to turn away. His curiosity was piqued, though—he'd been on enough top-secret missions to qualify at least *peeking*, right? Just to see if they needed help with…whatever they were doing in there? Surely a SOLDIER who took on First Class missions could handle it. "I'm just gonna take a quick look," he told the officer, patting the man's pauldron as he passed.

As Zack waltzed in, he heard the officer mutter, dismayed, "Oh, Mr. SOLDIER…my faith in you has been crushed…"

Rolling his eyes, Zack bit back another smirk, wondering just *why* this character of an officer was on guard duty in the first place, only to quickly become distracted by the people occupying the Training Room.

There were three men, all in white suits, scattered about the VR controls. The nearest, sporting a long, black ponytail, appeared to be the busiest, adjusting his circular glasses as he read through papers on a clipboard. The other two men stood apart, glancing nervously between the long-haired man, and the screens displaying various, incomprehensible data.

At Zack's entrance, one of the anxious men startled, hastily making his way over. In a hushed voice, he told Zack, "Professor Hojo is here today. Don't do anything to agitate him. It could start a lot of

trouble."

"Hojo?" Zack questioned unthinkingly, recalling the name from the missions he took on for R&D. "You mean, the guy Sephiroth said was __"

The man desperately shushed him, but it was too late—the scientist with the ponytail lifted his head, turning to look directly at Zack. "Oh? Is Sephiroth the reason I've had so few worthy samples to study, as of late?" He sneered in a way that made Zack instantly uncomfortable, eyeing Zack as though appraising his very existence. "What *did* he tell you, I wonder?"

Me and my big mouth, Zack bemoaned internally. "He said…uhh," Zack stammered, panicking. So, *this* was Hojo. The same scientist Sephiroth dealt with on a regular basis. Who Sephiroth, decidedly, didn't like. The last thing Sephiroth needed was for Zack to make the situation even worse by admitting Sephiroth called him a walking mass of complexes. "I…don't remember," Zack decided on, shrugging one shoulder, and throwing in a somewhat belated grin. "Couldn't have been important."

Hojo peered at Zack through his glasses, somehow looking down on him despite being a significantly shorter man. "Nothing important…" Hojo repeated, eyeing the SOLDIER emblem on Zack's belt. "Ahh," he smiled knowingly, "you're a SOLDIER. You wouldn't happen to be the child Sephiroth's taken to tutoring, would you?"

Zack was quickly getting a sense of why Sephiroth disliked this guy. In less than two minutes of talking, Zack already couldn't keep a grimace off his face. Something about the way Hojo was looking at him—the tone of his voice. All of it had Zack's senses screaming at him to not trust the scientist, even without Sephiroth's warning to consider. "...and, if I am?" Zack countered slowly, suspicious and on edge.

"He takes so little interest in others," Hojo said, almost to himself, as he turned his gaze boredly back to his clipboard. "I'm not sure what he sees in a scrawny whelp like you."

"*Scrawny?*" Zack echoed, irate. Oh, he was also absolutely *not* going to enjoy working with this man. "This *scrawny* Second beat your Ifrit module, y'know!"

"Ifrit module…? Oh, yes!" Hojo recalled with a harsh cackle, followed by a dismissive wave of his hand. "Hardly even worth mentioning, that. So much insistence on *safety* restraints, instead of offering a real

challenge."

Zack deflated. Hardly worth *mentioning?* The VR data was a pain in the ass to fight. Not as bad as the real deal, sure, but Zack felt it definitely deserved *some* accolades.

"...although," Hojo mumbled to himself, "if Sephiroth has trained him, perhaps he might be of use against…hmm." He scoffed, suddenly, at whatever thought occurred to him. Then, he looked back at Zack with a curious glint in his eyes. One Zack distinctly didn't like. "On second thought," Hojo began, "I have an extra-special program you can fight. Interested?"

Narrowing his eyes at the director, Zack was immediately suspicious of the shift. "...what *kind* of extra-special program?"

"Some data I designed on a lark, that displays power inconceivable in reality," Hojo chuckled.

At that, the man that first spoke to Zack stepped forward. "Professor Hojo! You can't possibly mean to use that data on a human!"

The other researcher in the room nodded emphatically in agreement, his eyes wide and fearful. "Not that one!" he pleaded. "It's way too dangerous!"

Hojo paid them no mind, wholly focused on Zack. "It would be a worthy opponent for a first-rate operative…such as yourself," he said, still half-laughing through his words.

"I think I'll pass," Zack decided, crossing his arms over his chest. Wiser to err on the side of caution, he thought, considering Sephiroth's warning. That, and the absolutely sky high *creep* vibes Hojo was giving off.

"No?" Hojo questioned, his tone just shy of being believably surprised. "And here I thought Sephiroth's protégé would *jump* at the chance to prove his mettle." He sighed deeply, and dramatically, thoroughly disappointed as he shook his head. "A shame. Of course, not everyone can become an elite warrior like *Sephiroth.*"

Zack bristled, debating. He didn't want to fight whatever weird data Hojo made. Especially not when Sephiroth told him explicitly to *not* get involved with the guy, if he didn't have to. But, on the other hand, he was Sephiroth's protégé. His *only* protégé.

…which, he supposed, meant his abilities sort of spoke for themselves.

“Got nothin’ to prove,” Zack snapped back.

“How *interesting* that you think you don’t,” Hojo observed, tilting his head as he examined Zack once more. “You wouldn’t want to shame your mentor’s name, now, would you? What would people think, seeing the only operative Sephiroth chose to personally train *balking* at something so simple?”

Zack’s stomach sank, twisting with guilt. *Was* he bringing shame to Sephiroth? He never thought too hard about being Sephiroth’s protégé—not this much, at any rate. Didn’t think about what it meant to others. How it came across. People largely would expect him to be able to handle some stupid VR data, with someone so famously powerful training him.

Behind Hojo, though, Zack saw both of the other researchers shaking their heads at him, gesturing rapidly, emphatically, *No.*

“I can’t imagine Sephiroth wouldn’t be disappointed, seeing you so unwilling to assist in the betterment of science—for *SOLDIER*, especially,” Hojo pointed out.

Other people were one thing, but Sephiroth, Zack knew, probably wouldn’t want him to take part in this nonsense.

“That doesn’t sound like him, at all,” Zack stated firmly. Screw what others thought—Sephiroth would be pissed if he found out Zack got roped into Hojo’s little schemes. *That* much, Zack was certain of.

Rather than disappointing Hojo, however, the professor appeared oddly pleased by the defiance, smiling disconcertingly. “You know him that well, do you?”

Zack felt like he stuck his foot in his mouth again, even if he wasn’t sure *how*, exactly. What he did know was that he had zero interest in being here, anymore. “Well enough,” Zack replied, shrugging noncommittally. “Anyway, I gotta go…write up a report for him,” he lied. “Good luck with the experiments.” With that, Zack turned and beelined for the door.

“One moment,” Hojo called out to him. “What is your name, SOLDIER?”

Even as the door slid open, Zack hesitated in place. He didn’t want to

tell Hojo anything, anymore, but he couldn't really avoid it. SOLDIER worked with R&D all the time. Plus, Hojo could just look up the record of who beat the Ifrit module—it wouldn't be hard to figure out who Zack was. So, with a wary glare, he told Hojo, "It's Zack."

"Zack. I see." Hojo inclined his head, his smile somehow that much more sinister. "I'll be sure to remember that."

Zack scowled in discomfort, and sped out the door. Yet, even after the door shut behind him—even after he left the SOLDIER floor, entirely, he couldn't shake the ominous feeling of being observed, like he was suddenly under a microscope.

Haphazard Headquarters

Chapter Summary

> Zack is called to the Director's Office for a new mission, just for everything to spiral out of control.

Chapter Notes

> I feel the need to apologize in advance for how canon-heavy the next couple chapters are lmao There's so much that happens during the attack on HQ and I was struggling to figure out a way to cut it all down and have it still track with Starstruck's plot. Hopefully the narration makes up for it! People who have played CC and CCR will probably notice I'm swapping between the two for dialogue as the situation calls for it. Some dialogue though just. OOF lol I promise there will be new, non-canon scenes after this. And once Zack meets Aerith, canon will REALLY start diverging.

The war with Wutai was over.

The news finally hit the papers. Zack got an email from Lazard about it, praising everyone's efforts. Especially Sephiroth's. Which, Zack conceded, was fair enough—until he found out that he, despite taking on an entire fort by himself, didn't so much as earn a *mention*.

Kunsel shrugged it off when they found out, reminding Zack that their level of involvement was determined by the media and PR, not their actual efforts.

It wasn't much of a comfort. It also reminded Zack of how both Angeal and Genesis didn't get much PR, either. They were *Firsts*, and yet, next to nothing. Weird as hell. Probably disappointing on their end, too.

Zack was still a little miffed about his own lack of accolades as he rode the elevator to the Director's office.

At least now he had a new assignment. Finally. It had to be, considering Sephiroth was the one to call him up. Something serious was coming, Zack was certain. After all, it had been months, but there was still no word on Angeal.

When he reached the office, he stood tall despite his nerves, rounding the corner and immediately spotting Sephiroth.

Sephiroth was leaning on a nearby desk, a tablet in his hand. He looked up when Zack entered, a smile just starting to form on his lips. But, he soon dropped his gaze again, shutting his eyes as Zack passed.

Seems tired, Zack noticed, seeing the dark circles on the First's cheeks. Sephiroth must have been dealing with insomnia again. Zack didn't have time to question it though, because at that moment, Lazard spun in his chair to face him.

"Congratulations," Lazard said amiably. "As of this moment, you're promoted to SOLDIER First Class."

Zack stared openly at the director. He must have misheard. That *couldn't* be what this meeting was about. "Huh?" Zack managed to utter, only to quickly turn to look at Sephiroth for confirmation. "Seriously?"

"You've handled First Class missions before," Sephiroth stated, though he didn't meet Zack's gaze as he spoke. "...and there is a manpower shortage to consider."

So, not something Sephiroth was in favor of, still—he more likely just resigned himself to it.

"I understand your surprise," Lazard cut in smoothly, regaining Zack's attention. The director's eyes flicked pensively to the side. "Too much happened…too fast," he acknowledged. Then, with a serious expression, he addressed Zack once more. "Zack, I'm afraid I need your assistance again."

Zack heard the creak of Sephiroth's leather uniform as the man shifted, but Zack ignored him, too consumed by what all of this could mean. First Class promotion. First Class *mission*. Sephiroth, in the office with them—not to celebrate, but likely because he was being briefed, too. Or, had just *been* briefed.

If this was like Banora…

"Pushing another assignment on me?" Zack guessed, glancing back at Sephiroth.

Sephiroth had his arms crossed, and he sighed before meeting Zack's gaze. "My apologies," he replied, an edge of frustration in his voice.

Matching the man's frown, Zack shrugged in response. There wasn't much to be done about it, if it was already decided. Plus, Sephiroth would have deferred the mission to Zack for a *reason*. This was Zack's chance to make up for his failure in Banora—he had no doubt whatever this mission was, it had something to do with Angeal and Genesis.

Probably something to do with *protecting* them, at that.

"I'll fill you in, Zack," Lazard continued, "but before that, go to the briefing room and change into a First Class uniform."

Zack went, noting with some concern that Sephiroth seemed all the more preoccupied now—whatever was going on, it wasn't good.

After changing, and a quick rundown on his new equipment and materia fusion by someone from Materia Development, Zack was left to contemplate his new promotion. Finally, the threads of Zack's SOLDIER uniform were the sleek, First Class *black*. Zack tugged at the fabric of his shirt, just to look at it. Just to get it to register that, yes, he really made it. It didn't feel real.

…it also didn't feel as good as he hoped.

His PHS rang, Lazard's name flashing on the screen. When Zack answered, Lazard forwent any pleasantries, asking, "*Finished changing?*"

"Yeah, and I picked up materia fusion, too."

"*Then return to my office. I'll brief you on the mission.*"

"Yes, sir," Zack replied, hanging up and heading out.

He was barely out of the Briefing Room when his PHS beeped. More messages. Curious, Zack opened them as he walked, seeing an official message from the Company, and one from Kunsel just after it.

Reading the Personnel Announcement first, Zack stopped short, frozen in horror at the words on the screen.

This is an official notification of the change in status for the following personnel.

Angeal Hewley - SOLDIER 1st Class:

Killed in action

Genesis Rhapsodos - SOLDIER 1st Class:

Killed in action

Zack blinked, barely believing what he was seeing. This…couldn't be real. He checked Kunsel's message, sure his friend had to be reacting to the announcement.

And he was, however briefly—Kunsel clocked some kind of scheme, asking, "*Who do they think they're trying to fool?*"

It was a ploy. It had to be. It was just Shinra PR, trying to save face after losing two Firsts, and dozens of Seconds and Thirds. They deserted—they weren't *dead*.

After all, the only one strong enough to kill them was *Sephiroth*, and Sephiroth would have told Zack—would have tried to have Zack sent along first, in his stead—

Zack looked up from his PHS, unseeing, the goal of his newest assignment startlingly, dreadfully clear.

He rushed back to Lazard's office, hoping it was a ruse. That it was all some sort of trick by the Turks, to get Genesis and Angeal back, even if Zack couldn't figure out how that would work. As the elevator slowly rose, Zack could barely breathe, telling himself it *had* to be fake. The Company would never try to kill their *own* like this—

With that thought, though, he recalled Sephiroth's frustration. The *jadedness* Angeal didn't want rubbing off on him. The lack of surprise that the Company would condone *violence* against Angeal and Genesis, if it meant dragging them back to HQ.

What if missions like *this* were why Sephiroth was so jaded—not because of the desertion itself, but because he *knew* this would be the Company's response?

Zack was numb when he walked back into Lazard's office, forgetting his promotion and the pride it should bring entirely.

As soon as he entered, Lazard put his fears into words. "The Company has decided to eliminate Genesis and his cohorts," Lazard declared, standing solemnly from his chair. "This includes Angeal, as well."

“And you want *me* to do it,” Zack concluded, the words falling from his lips as heavy as lead.

“No, the Shinra Army will handle it,” Lazard clarified.

“What about me?” Zack pressed uneasily, knowing he had to be involved in this somehow—they wouldn’t be having this conversation if he wasn’t.

“They don’t trust you,” Lazard informed him.

From behind Zack, Sephiroth piped up, “They believe your emotions will hamper your judgment.”

“Well, of *course!*” Zack snapped, whirling around to scowl more directly at Sephiroth.

“That’s why I’m going, too,” Sephiroth elaborated, shifting only slightly in Zack’s direction.

“To kill them?” Zack asked, miserable and enraged all at once. How could Sephiroth possibly do that? They were his friends—his ‘*only*’ friends—He sent Zack before to keep them out of harm’s way, but now —

Sephiroth’s expression was hidden, somewhat, but Zack peered at the glimpses of it beneath his bangs anyway, knowing by now what to look for. Sephiroth knew Zack would never willingly take this mission. *Never*, not in a *million* years, kill Angeal. The army knew that, too. There was no reason to put Zack on this assignment, with Sephiroth so aware of Zack’s inability to see it through. There had to be a catch. There had to be *some* twist to this—

And, just as he was beginning to despair that he completely misread Sephiroth from the get-go, he spotted what he was searching for.

A smirk.

Barely there. Barely visible. Certainly not visible from where Lazard was standing, with how subtle the expression was. A faint, *knowing* smirk, just like the one Sephiroth wore when he told Zack to ignore Lazard’s direct orders, for Banora.

Zack felt the briefest sense of relief, just for the walls around them to suddenly rumble—and then all at once, all the building’s alarms began to blare.

Red emergency lights emerged from slats near the ceiling, flashing in time with the deafening noise. Shutters descended automatically over the shelves where Lazard kept his documentation, slamming shut and locking—all information sealed safely behind the metal.

“An intruder,” Lazard observed, surprisingly calm, but no less stern as he took in the emergency systems powering on.

“Where?” Zack questioned.

“Close,” Lazard determined, quickly taking charge. “Sephiroth, the president!” he ordered. With Sephiroth already departing for the stairs, Lazard turned and added, “Zack, entrance!”

“Yeah, you got it!” Zack confirmed, rushing past Sephiroth to get to the elevator.

A malfunction stopped the elevator at the SOLDIER Floor, and Zack stepped off to see the entire area in chaos. The anti-fiend machines—Red Saucers, on this floor—were completely on the fritz, chasing down employees in lieu of actual enemies. Zack cut down every one he saw, doing a full sweep of the floor before heading for the entrance again.

The delay might lose him some points with Lazard, but he wasn’t going to just stand by and watch people get hurt—not when he could do something about it.

When he did reach the main entrance, he found he had his work cut out for him. The entire place was already a wreck, with one set of stairs to the lower level blasted apart, unusable. Sections of the building were on fire, and the army was too busy to put out the flames—Security Officers shouted and gestured to each other in a panic, shooting at their own Sweeper units as the mechs destroyed anything they could reach.

“Why are Shinra weapons attacking the Shinra Building?!” Zack exclaimed, looking past the smoke and rubble to see two Officers get shot down.

Then, from behind the Sweeper that shot them, a Genesis copy flipped into view with its blades drawn.

Genesis.

Well, this attack explained why Genesis was stealing Shinra tech. Charging at the enemy, Zack swung his weapon at the copy, first. It didn't last long against his unrelenting slashes, falling nearly as quick as it arrived. The Sweeper took a little more finesse, and Zack rolled past shards of broken display cases to get behind the machine. He stabbed the back of it, jabbing his blade through some of its wiring. Before it could turn around and level its guns at him, he blasted it with Thundara, and it collapsed in a sparking heap.

Gunfire from below told him there was still plenty more where that came from.

Leaping from the edge of the broken stairs, Zack landed right in the middle of the fray, and saw that Security was completely overwhelmed. More Sweepers continuously stomped into the building through a gigantic, smoldering hole in the wall—the remains of the doors, blown apart to allow more enemies through.

One of the Officers was slammed off his feet, but Zack didn't have time to assist—at the same time, a crew of copies ran in alongside the Sweepers, spreading out to cause as much mayhem as possible.

"Damn, they're swarming us!" Zack growled with frustration, rushing forward.

It was difficult enough taking on so many enemies at once, dodging bullets and blades as Zack tried to prevent their progress. It was worse when, just as Zack finished off two of the copies, half a dozen Red Saucers poured into the building. Zack cursed his luck, noting with concern that he couldn't see any other Officers standing.

He was handling this fight alone.

Zack swung his sword in broad, spinning arcs to hit as many of the saucers at possible, as well as the nearest Sweeper. The Saucers, thankfully, couldn't withstand much damage, and soon four out of five were sliced into useless piles of scrap. He lobbed another Thundara at the Sweeper, noting with irritation that his mana was going to run out *fast,* if this kept up.

Then, just as he was distracted with blocking the Sweeper's gunfire with his blade, a Blizzard smashed against the top of his head.

More copies rushed him, their blades catching the fabric of his shirt as he stumbled back to dodge. Before he could lament the damage to his new uniform, another Saucer launched itself at him, colliding with

Zack and knocking him to the floor. Another Blizzard crashed to the ground where he once stood, the copies uncoordinated but no less determined, surrounding him.

Could really use a limit break right now, Zack groused internally, cursing the unreliability of his DMW. He spun as he got to his feet, driving the enemies backward and giving himself room to charge at the nearest copy. Slashing mercilessly, Zack determined he was just going to have to hold these bastards off until some kind of help arrived. How long that would take, he didn't have time to think about.

A Fira put down both the copy he was facing, and the one rushing at him from the side. Zack had just enough time to hop over a spinning Saucer trying to take him out at the ankles, before he rounded on it and jabbed his sword through its circuitry. Then, just as he was searching for the next opponent, he heard the stomping steps of more Sweepers over the din of the alarms.

Four of them, all pushing through the entrance at once.

Snarling in frustration, Zack prepared to meet them. There was no telling how many were still outside—he never did hear back from Lazard about how many mechs Genesis swiped, and now he regretted not asking. Still, he was a SOLDIER—a *First*. He had to be able handle a few rogue machines.

It's with that in mind that Zack ran at the Sweepers, knocking away the guns of the nearest, and then following up with a Thundara to hit three in a row. He hoped he would get a No MP Cost at *some* point during this attack, because he was going to need it, at this rate. Ducking under the second Sweeper as it tried to ram him, Zack rolled, and then slashed across its back.

That sweeper sparked and jerked in place, its weapons swinging and firing wildly, taking down one of its own before Zack finished it off.

Two down, two to go. Zack rushed the Sweeper to his right, slamming his sword across its front. Then, carrying that momentum, he turned on his heel and slashed at the final Sweeper.

He kept up the strikes like that, refusing to let either mech get a shot at his open back, until, at last, they fell.

With the last of the Sweepers reduced to sparking heaps, Zack leaned on his blade, catching his breath. Nothing else came in through the opening—now the only issue was contacting more Officers about the

flames still crackling away—

Just then, Zack heard footsteps approaching him, from behind.

Straightening, and drawing his weapon back up, Zack spun around to suddenly spot his remaining mentor. “Sephiroth!” he called out, relief washing over him, despite the crisis they were still combating. “The intruders are Genesis copies!”

Sephiroth didn’t appear surprised, eyeing the copy at Zack’s feet with disdain. “There’s no doubt,” he stated decisively, “This is Hollander’s doing.”

Zack had…*no* idea who that was. “Who?”

“A Shinra scientist who stole the copy tech, then vanished,” Sephiroth explained, looking around the entry hall, assessing the damage.

A scientist on the run with the copy tech didn’t bode well, for anyone, Zack figured. Definitely explained how Genesis was making his army, though. “So, Hollander and Genesis are working together,” Zack determined.

A flash of another expression crossed Sephiroth’s face—a wince, almost—before he turned his away from Zack. “...Quite possibly.”

“What is it they’re after…?” Zack wondered aloud.

Sephiroth, apparently taking the question as directed at him, met Zack’s gaze and answered, “Hollander sought to head the Science Department, and lost. He’s borne a grudge ever since. Revenge is most likely his objective.”

“So *petty!*” Zack scorned, scowling. “And Genesis is supporting this stupid cause?” It seemed so irrelevant. One minute Genesis was claiming he was a monster, the next he was helping some dumb scientist commit *more* monstrous actions, just because the guy didn’t get a promotion?

Sephiroth wore a conflicted expression, turning away again.

This time, as Zack watched him, he realized the move was probably on purpose—to make it harder for people to see even the most understandable emotions. His old friend was attacking them. They were *both* stuck in a position now where they’d likely have to fight Genesis and Angeal, if they weren’t very, very careful. Of course

Sephiroth would be upset.

Yet, the only indication Sephiroth permitted to be seen was the clenching of his fists. “I would prefer not to believe it,” he said softly, “but…”

“Well, then don’t,” Zack countered. Genesis might have his own plot entirely. One that wasn’t so stupidly petty. It could even be a coincidence that Genesis and Hollander’s goals overlapped. No sense believing the worst when they didn’t have confirmation, yet. Zack still had *way* too many questions.

Sephiroth faced him, then, staring at Zack for a moment’s deliberation before he replied, “Very well, I won’t.” Mind made up—because apparently that little reassurance was all he needed—Sephiroth made his way over the rubble that was once the entry doors. “Now, Zack. Copies have sighted in Sector 8 as well. Let’s go,” he commanded.

“Roger that!” Zack responded, following Sephiroth outside.

Sector 8 was pure pandemonium. Copies and mechs chased civilians down the streets, and the air was full of panicked shouts and screams. Zack and Sephiroth split up to cover more ground, with Zack bolting toward the fountain area.

This Sector was covered, apparently, by the Turks. Zack hardly had time to realize Kunsel was right—one of them *did* wear sunglasses unnecessarily—before the whole group was moving on. Including Cissnei, a shuriken-wielding redhead, who distracted Zack *very* much before he realized the buzzing in his brain wasn’t just excitement over meeting a cute girl.

It was a new limit break.

Just in time for even more fighting, too. Zack ran toward Loveless Avenue, and the sound of gunfire. Zack’s mission was clear: Track down this Hollander guy, and help out anyone under attack. The latter applied to just about everybody in the area—Immediately upon entering the avenue, Zack spotted a man to his left, cowering before a Sweeper.

Zack rushed at the mech, shouting, “Hey! Over here!”

The man scrambled to his feet, dashing away for cover just as Zack skidded to a halt in front of the anti-fiend machine.

At the same moment, a Genesis copy ran down the alleyway, ignoring the civilian and targeting Zack, instead.

Zack thrashed them both, and the man he saved had only just gotten a 'thank you' out when Zack spotted another Sweeper down the way, attacking a woman and a young girl. Wasting no time, Zack ran at the group, charging mana as he closed in. The moment he was close enough, he loosed a Thundara in the Sweeper's direction, catching it and two Red Saucers in its wake.

Before the machines could recover, Zack rushed the nearest Red Saucer, swinging at it with flat side of his sword. The impact sent it flying, slamming into the Sweeper and knocking the mech off balance, and then the Saucer ricocheted into the wall of a nearby shop. The second Saucer zoomed into view, and Zack hurled another Thundara at it, frying the circuits.

The Sweeper rounded on Zack then, aiming right for his head.

Zack ducked, diving under the bullets. He rolled out of the way, mana sparking on his fingertips as he sent a final Thundara at the mech. The Sweeper completely short-circuited, spasming before it collapsed.

As the civilians he rescued thanked and praised his efforts, Zack felt more than a little proud of himself. *This* was what he always wanted to do—use his power to help others. And now, he really was. Seeing the people of Midgar's smiling and grateful faces was invigorating.

…at least, as long as Zack didn't think about where his opponents came from in the first place.

Still, he had to focus—Hollander might be close by. With that in mind, Zack made his way further down the avenue, itching for action.

The fight came to him first, with the loud, echoing cracks of a shotgun.

Suddenly, down the road, Cissnei came into view, leaping backward as she avoided oncoming bullets. She readied her shuriken, but just before she could throw it, the unseen enemy shot the weapon out of her hand. Cissnei flinched, grabbing at her arm—injured, as she glowered at her opponent.

Zack dashed forward, sliding in front to shield her as he raised his sword. Immediately, he spotted familiar, auburn hair, and an unmistakable red coat. "*Genesis!*" he snarled, only to do a double take

as Genesis raised a shotgun, and a rod not unlike the one wielded by another Turk Zack met earlier. The rapier Genesis carried in Banora was nowhere to be seen.

As the man stared at him without recognition, Zack realized he was wrong.

“No—another copy?!” Zack determined, choosing not to wait to find out. He rushed the copy, slashing broadly and meeting its swings of the rod, blow for blow.

This copy, though, was a cut above the rest. It effortlessly parried a swipe of Zack’s sword, following up with its shotgun.

Zack barely had time to avoid the worst of it, the edge of the blast of pellets zipping across his skin. He slammed his sword against the rod, shoving to push the copy back and away from Cissnei. The copy retaliated with a combo of smacks from the rod, striking Zack in the collar and the face before he could dodge out of the onslaught. He hardly felt the pain though—he had to get this bastard away from Cissnei so she could regroup. He wasn’t sure where she was now—She looked hurt—

And then, he felt his limit break spark to life.

He activated it, hearing Cissnei shout, “*You can do it, Zack!*” as he did. The energy came to him in a rush, overcoming his senses. Embracing it, Zack wound up hurling his sword straight up into the air. It wasn’t a concern, though—he felt like he was on fire, now, in the best way. Energy burst from every inch, and Zack leapt, catching his sword in its descent and flipping back to the ground, ready for action.

Sparks of magic like little stars danced at the edge of his vision, and he charged forward again, feeling like his luck in this battle was about to change for the better. Sure enough, the copy winced with every strike Zack landed, the slashes stronger and heavier, every one a critical blow. Faster than Zack expected, his limit surged again, and he released Chain Slash in an instant.

The copy collapsed, hitting the ground face first.

Zack backed off, watching it from a distance, sword still ready. Just as he was debating charging a Fira, the copy moved, not finished yet. It struggled to get up, and Zack readied his weapon as it raised itself to its knees.

Then, a huge, black wing erupted from the copy's shoulder.

Zack's focus ground to a halt, overcome by the memory of Genesis stretching his own, misshapen wing. The copy's wing flapped, propelling itself up enough to stand, and began limping forward. As it put forth more effort, trying to fly, Zack shook himself out of his stupor. Just as the copy's feet lifted off the ground, Zack struck, slashing across the copy's back and sending it crashing right back down again.

It stayed down, this time.

Zack glowered at it. At the black feathers scattered around the copy's body. At the memories they brought back, of Banora.

Of Genesis, calling himself a monster, before flying off into the sky.

Cissnei approached the body, examining it. She was quiet for a moment, kneeling to get a closer look at the dark, outstretched feathers of the copy's new appendage. Then, somberly, she said, "When I was a kid, I always wanted to have wings." She stood again, just shy of stoic as she regarded Zack, a soft sadness in her voice. "Y'know," she continued, "like an angel."

Zack couldn't bring himself to hold her gaze, turning away bitterly. Remembering. The wings he saw on people weren't from angels—it was on a pompous, petty SOLDIER deserter, who was responsible for this entire mess. Who put innocent people in *danger*, possibly just for a stupid revenge plot. Someone who systematically *murdered* everyone in his hometown, save one. And then Angeal—

He didn't want to think about it.

Genesis might have been Sephiroth's friend, once, but Zack was having a hell of a time understanding *how*, after all of that. "If people had wings," Zack groused sourly, thinking of the man's infuriating smirk—not an ounce of regret for the massacre, "...they'd be monsters."

"Wings symbolize freedom for those who have none," Cissnei argued, surprisingly gently, but still firmly shaking her head. "They don't symbolize monsters."

Zack willed himself to calm down—they weren't even talking about Genesis. She meant metaphorically. The symbolism, at least, he could see. If he really thought about it, any kid longing to fly free would

want some wings to help them do it.

Letting out a weak laugh, and not wanting to think too hard about *why* Cissnei would have dreamt of such a thing, so young, Zack turned back to her with a sympathetic smile.

Cissnei smiled back at him, a little more warmly. Then, back to business, her voice was strong and decisive as she praised, “SOLDIER First Class, indeed. You’ve got skill.”

“Well, unlike the Turks, fighting’s our main thing,” Zack half-joked, in response.

“Here,” Cissnei said, laughing lightly as she handed Zack a business card. “A little gift, for helping me out.”

Zack read it, finding a mail address for something called ‘Research Dept. QMC.’

“Turk supply shop,” Cissnei explained, no doubt catching Zack’s confusion. “It should have some nicer equipment than you guys get.”

“Thanks,” Zack laughed, both in gratitude and the subtle dig at SOLDIER’s budget.

With that, and a quick, amiable assurance that they’d meet again, Cissnei departed, heading back toward the main hub of Sector 8.

Zack watched her go, and it was only when she was definitely out of earshot that he finally remembered he should have asked about her limit break. He groaned at his own distractability, bringing a fist to his forehead. She didn’t really *react* to him using it, if he remembered right. It was tough to tell in the middle of a fight, but she knew Tseng. All the Turks probably knew about Zack’s limit break, already. So, since Cissnei hadn’t commented on it, there was a good chance he used her lucky star thing correctly—

His musing was interrupted by the ringing of his PHS.

Digging the device out of his pocket, Zack flipped it open the second he saw Sephiroth’s name.

Sephiroth didn’t wait for a greeting, ordering, “*Once Sector 8 is clear, come to Mako Reactor 5.*”

“Did you find something out?” Zack questioned, wondering if

someone finally caught sight of Hollander.

"*Angeal has been sighted*."

It took a second for the words to process. For Zack to remember the chaos right now was really a distraction from their main mission. That he, and Sephiroth, were supposed to be hunting Genesis and Angeal down, and that he still had no idea what Sephiroth's plan was.

Sephiroth could have *told* him by now—

"So it's search and destroy?" Zack asked irritably.

"*The army is mobilizing, but there's still time*," Sephiroth said, nothing in his voice giving away that any of this nonsense was anything out of the ordinary. Not even the barest hint that they'd be doing anything other than following orders, even if that smirk in Lazard's office seemed to say otherwise. "*You and I will find them before they do, and* __"

"And *what?!*" Zack shouted into his PHS.

Sephiroth was silent, no doubt not expecting the sudden snap. Possibly recovering from the volume. Zack wasn't sure, until Sephiroth smoothly answered, "*...fail to eliminate them.*"

"For real?!" Zack perked up in an instant, delighted with relief. *That must have been the plan the whole time*, he realized sheepishly, wincing internally that Sephiroth hadn't deserved that outburst, at all.

Sephiroth took it in stride, though, chuckling. "*Yes, 'for real,'*" he replied, dragging out the slang he was clearly unused to saying.

"*Excellent!*" Zack cheered, only to very quickly remember that they were on a timer, now. They had to outpace the army, convince Genesis to stop attacking people, *and* get both him and Angeal out of Midgar alive. Somehow.

It would be fine. They could do all of that. Right? Two SOLDIER Firsts against…a worryingly large portion of Shinra's Army?

"Uh…probably!" Zack amended, still hopeful, but far less certain of their success.

Monstrous Men

Chapter Summary

> Zack and Sephiroth investigate Mako Reactor 5, learning much more than Zack bargained for.

Chapter Notes

> Hope everyone's having a good weekend! :D Soon I will be released from all this canon dialogue LMAO I did change the emphasis in uh. One line. Because it's annoyed me for years. I'm excited to get to ch.11 and some of the bigger changes :3c

Roars of monsters echoed in the depths of Mako Reactor 5.

Zack could hear growling. Heavy flaps of wings. Claws, tapping and scraping across metal floors. The reactor was *infested*, and Zack couldn't fathom how—it was within the city. Security should have noticed and dealt with it ages ago.

What's more, Sephiroth was nowhere to be seen.

Certain the man must be here somewhere, Zack walked along, scanning for any sign of Sephiroth. The walkways were all empty, though.

Then, a Sahagin leapt from the level above, landing heavily in front of him.

Zack readied his sword in tandem with the fiend raising its trident. He darted forward, quickly knocking the monster off balance with his bladework. Just as Zack thought he had it on the ropes, the Sahagin crouched, preparing its weapon. Zack hurled a Fira at the fiend, the spell exploding across its chest before it could jump.

Defeated, the Sahagin slumped, and then landed in a motionless heap.

Now that it wasn't trying to kill him, Zack realized it looked strange—white, feathery protrusions fanned out around its shoulders and wrists. The creature was oddly pale, as well, with a gold inlay adorning its head. Zack frowned at it, crouching to examine the sculpted adornment, only to see the innermost part of it resembled a human face, with its eyes closed.

An *uncannily* familiar face, at that.

“Is that Angeal’s face…?” Zack wondered.

“It appears Genesis isn’t the only one who can be copied,” came Sephiroth’s voice, as the man approached from the opposite end of the walkway. He passed Zack, even as Zack shot him a worried, confused grimace in response. After a few more steps, he stopped, hanging his head in quiet contemplation.

Zack’s head was awhirl with questions, but Sephiroth wouldn’t have made him come all this way for a weird-looking Sahagin. So, he waited, watching. Expectant.

Sephiroth had a far off, nostalgic look in his eyes when he finally, softly muttered, “The Company training room…”

“Hm?”

“We used to sneak in there for fun, when the Seconds were out,” Sephiroth elaborated, “Genesis, Angeal, and I.”

Unsure how the Training Room was relevant right now, Zack narrowed his eyes, but didn’t comment on it. Instead, he tried to prompt Sephiroth for more info, noting, “You guys were pretty tight.”

Sephiroth gave a halfhearted shrug, scoffing. “I wonder…” he said idly, still not quite meeting Zack’s gaze as he spoke. There was a heaviness to the air around him again, the same way he did when he usually clammed up, and changed the subject. This time, for whatever reason, Sephiroth kept talking. “Months ago, we spent an average afternoon there, with the VR set to Junon. Though, it could have been anywhere. Genesis spent the time reading Loveless. I wanted to spar. It was all…typical.”

“...except?” Zack added, sensing there was a ‘but’ in that statement somewhere. Something related to the copies. Though, musing on Sephiroth’s reminiscing, he remembered he already knew of a time when one of their hangouts was spent in a less-than-friendly manner. “Wait—are you talking about when the Training Room was…?” he trailed off, unable to finish the thought when he saw Sephiroth, damningly, shrink in on himself with shame.

“I sparred them both, at first,” Sephiroth continued, “Until Genesis wanted to fight me alone.” His brows furrowed in a regretful expression. “I accepted, though…perhaps I was too *smug*, as Genesis

put it."

"How do you mean?"

"I taunted him. It wasn't much different from our usual exchanges, but…" Sephiroth shook his head, sighing softly. "Genesis…began taking the fight far more seriously than I expected. Enough that Angeal attempted to intervene, only for Genesis to remove him from the match by force."

"He *attacked* Angeal?!" Zack questioned, standing up in alarm. "I thought they were friends!"

"Genesis was always competitive," Sephiroth explained, but even he appeared to think it was a lame excuse, with how he frowned. "I… should have ended things there. Instead, the match continued until Angeal got between us." He went quiet then, for a moment. When Sephiroth spoke again, he smirked, but it was a bitter thing—frustrated. "Genesis tried to continue the match, but his spell broke the extra sword Angeal was using. The blade snapped, and it sliced through Genesis's shoulder."

Zack winced. That had to hurt. "...So, was everything alright?"

"Yes, as far as Genesis was concerned," Sephiroth revealed, stepping to the other side of the walkway, to peer down into the reactor. "But, as for Angeal…" With his back to Zack, it was impossible to tell what he was thinking now. What memories he was lost in.

"What happened?"

Surprisingly, Sephiroth's shoulders shook in a weak, warm huff of laughter. "Later, I received one of his famous lectures."

Hard to imagine the SOLDIER poster boy getting lectured—Or…it *was*. Once upon a time. Now, Zack could only recall Angeal's argument with Sephiroth, back when Sephiroth was fighting for Zack to *not* get promoted before he was ready. The argument did come off like a lecture, in retrospect.

Either that, or a scolding.

The tone of Sephiroth's voice was too light for it to have been that serious, after the Training Room incident, though. "What kind of lecture?" Zack asked.

“Always the same,” Sephiroth described, the amusement in his voice much stronger now, as he tilted his head at the memory. “Discipline, dreams, honor, et cetera.”

“Ah,” Zack laughed weakly, *extremely* familiar. “One of those, huh?”

While Zack reminisced, Sephiroth went over to examine the Angeal copy. In an instant, the warm nostalgia was gone, cooled into a tone as sharp as shards of ice. “So it’s true,” Sephiroth muttered disdainfully. “They’re in league with Hollander.”

The topic switch was so abrupt, Zack would have ordinarily let it go. Would have gone right back to the mission at hand, as he followed Sephiroth further into the reactor. But, as he trailed after Sephiroth, the two of them silent save for their echoing steps on the metal walkway, Zack couldn’t help but ponder all the things left unsaid.

The three Firsts, once close enough to hang out during their downtime at work, were so torn apart that Sephiroth now scoffed at their old connection. The incident happened *before* Sephiroth and Angeal argued about Zack. Even then, Sephiroth was of the mindset that Zack would have an easier time talking to his old friend. And things only seemed to spiral from there.

And the army thinks my *emotions will hamper my judgment?* Zack thought, glancing surreptitiously at Sephiroth as they made their way to a ladder. If he hadn’t spent so much time with Sephiroth over the past few months, he might not have noticed the tension that was plainly plaguing the man. Zack might have shrugged off the whole story about Genesis’s accident as a weird thing to bring up right then, and moved on. Now, though, Zack was sure he had a decent read on Sephiroth.

Sephiroth must have mentioned the incident because it was relevant to him, personally—probably couldn’t get it out of his mind, with this mission bringing it all back to the forefront.

“...was that the last time you guys hung out?” Zack guessed, watching Sephiroth closely enough to catch the sudden startle—completely lost in thought, until Zack spoke.

Sephiroth glanced at him, and then down, before determinedly walking up to the ladder that would lead them to the next level down. “...yes,” he answered, clipped and short.

“So, when you told me you and Angeal weren’t seeing eye-to-eye…”

Zack continued, attention momentarily grabbed by a far off Ahriman, flapping in the distance. It was pale. Strangely glinted gold, in some spots, like the Sahagin. Another copy. "...it was because of that fight," Zack concluded, watching warily as the Ahriman flew in the other direction, away from them.

After a long, steady breath, Sephiroth nodded. "I didn't see the harm, initially, in continuing the match. If Genesis wanted to fight until a clear winner was decided, I would grant him that." He grimaced briefly, before he turned away from Zack. "...it was only a spar, after all. So I thought." Then, he descended, leaving Zack at that.

Zack scowled, quickly climbing down after him. About halfway, he heard the shriek of monsters, and the flare of Firaga.

When he hopped off the ladder, he found the monsters dead, with Sephiroth already standing stoically victorious over their dissipating bodies.

Zack caught up with him, determined to get Sephiroth to talk more. It had been months, after all. With Angeal and Genesis gone—*deserters*—Sephiroth was probably just stewing in all this, that whole time. Zack didn't blame him for not wanting to discuss it, but…he'd told Zack this much already.

Surely that meant *something*.

"Angeal thought otherwise, huh?" Zack prompted, walking next to Sephiroth, and keeping an eye out for monsters.

"He thought it *unbecoming* that I kept provoking Genesis," Sephiroth recalled with annoyance, and Zack had no doubts that it was a direct quote, this time. Sephiroth's irritation soon deflated, though, at whatever else he remembered. "It…wasn't simply a spar, to Genesis. There was more going on."

"Like what?"

Sephiroth went silent. His steps slowed, until eventually, he stopped walking altogether. "...our friendship may not have been what I thought it was," he uttered quietly.

Zack stayed with him, watching Sephiroth intently. Worriedly. That air of misery was back, and with Sephiroth's shoulders so slumped, he could see it physically weighing on the man. "...what did you think it was?" Zack asked as gently as he could.

“I…” Sephiroth hesitated, lost in the memory of it. So much so, the facade broke, and Zack could see exactly what lay behind the stoicism —the anguish and the hurt, plain as day on Sephiroth’s face, as he admitted, “I thought we were having *fun*.”

Zack was about to reach out to him, brain blanking on any words of comfort, when he spied a glint of gold trim on pale skin swooping behind Sephiroth. “*Down!*” Zack shouted, glad Sephiroth was as quick as he was—the Ahriman copy zipped past, just over Sephiroth’s head, and then collided with Zack’s slash of his sword. Knocked from the air, Zack blasted it with Fira to finish it off.

When he looked up again, Sephiroth was staring at the burning remains of the creature, blank-faced.

“Sephiroth, are you—?”

“We should get moving,” Sephiroth stated, his voice flat, and emotionless. Like he flipped a switch. He walked past Zack, heading for the next ladder. “Hollander’s laboratory is this way. It’s a private, sanctioned facility. We may find leads on Angeal.”

“…Alright,” Zack conceded, slow to catch up. He supposed this was the reason the army trusted Sephiroth and not him, when it came to emotions. If Sephiroth could turn his off at will, it wouldn’t matter what sort of distress he was under. He’d carry out the mission.

Yet, the expression Sephiroth wore only moments ago was burned into Zack’s brain.

The raw pain on Sephiroth’s face was so at odds with the *hero* he grew up reading about, but it also felt infinitely more *real*. So real, in fact, that as Zack watched Sephiroth’s back, watched the confident, purposeful stride as they struggled to avoid a terrible, unwanted duty, Zack wasn’t convinced those emotions from earlier were really gone.

They might only be hidden. Still consuming Sephiroth, just beneath the surface. Anyone who didn’t know how to read Sephiroth would be none the wiser—he matched his posters, and that was that.

Zack, meanwhile, could only wonder worriedly, *Is that what he meant, about the pressure of being a First?*

Hollander’s hideout was an easy find, even if Zack had to get the door powered back up, first. While Sephiroth led the way downstairs, into

the facility, Zack stopped at the top to look around. It wasn't as creepy as he imagined a secret lab should be, but its very existence was probably creepy enough.

There was a disheveled bed tucked against the wall, so Hollander had probably slept here since whenever he left the Company. Most everything else in the room was lab equipment. A few tanks were scattered about, large enough for a person to waltz inside. Zack figured the liquid inside them must be mako, with how it glowed a brilliant green behind the glass windows.

Sephiroth headed to the closest tank, peering inside of it, only to utter in disgust, "How wretched…"

When Sephiroth moved on, grabbing a clipboard off a nearby console, Zack went to check the tank himself. Inside, one of the Sahagins floated in mako, Angeal's face centered on top of its own. Zack grimaced at it, backing away. "Must be where they make the copies," he commented.

Beside him, Sephiroth frowned at whatever he was reading. "These are…" he muttered, flipping several pages over, "...highly confidential research documents that Hollander stole."

"You mean like, from the Data Room?" Zack asked. "Are they the ones you were looking for?"

Sephiroth nodded. "The stolen documents were in regard to 'Project G,' 'Degradation,' and 'Ancients,'" he informed Zack. "Search the area —some of them may have been left here."

Zack started checking, quickly finding a few papers on a table across from them. Scanning the headings, he found the set was labeled 'The Ancients Project - Outline.' Zack skimmed it, squinting at a lot of scientific gobbledy-gook that he couldn't comprehend, only able to make sense of the last few sentences.

It is now an undisputed fact that the lifeform excavated from the earth is indeed of the ancient race spoken of in legend. Furthermore, history records that these "Ancients" channeled the power of this planet to tear the world asunder.

Using the cells of the unearthed Ancient, we have begun research on creating and mass-producing a race with comparable abilities. The primary objective of this research is to significantly reduce mako excavation costs.

Seemed like a lame reason to 'mass-produce' an entire race, if Zack was honest. He also wasn't entirely sure he was reading it right. It would mean Shinra was making…people.

Though, instantly, his mind drifted to the Genesis copies. Copy tech, stolen from Shinra itself. It was only *repurposed* to make Genesis's army. Shinra was already making people—this document only confirmed they were doing it via multiple methods.

Not wanting to even *try* to unpack all that, Zack snatched the rest of the papers up and moved on, soon spotting more scattered on the edge of the bed.

Glancing at Sephiroth, who was engrossed with whatever disturbing facts he was reading, Zack wondered if it might be better if they started sharing their findings. Weird as they might be. When he retrieved the papers from the bed, he skimmed for anything that didn't have twenty math equations it was referencing.

Thankfully, this set had an abstract.

"Project G - Summary," Zack read aloud, "Objective: Implant the cells of an Ancient into a human fetus to imbue said fetus with the Ancient's abilities…' *Ugh*."

"It was Hollander's experiment," Sephiroth explained idly, apparently already familiar with the findings. "The result was a normal child. Which meant he failed, however…" he trailed off, flipping to the next page of what he was reading, and narrowing his eyes at it.

There was silence for several moments, until Zack took it as his cue to look for the final set of papers—something about degradation.

Searching the room with his eyes, Zack soon realized he walked right past more documents, lying on a table near the second mako tank. Jogging over, he immediately spotted the title: 'Report on the SOLDIER Degradation Phenomenon.' "Here's the last ones," he announced to Sephiroth, holding them up to read. "…'The heightened abilities of SOLDIER members are maintained by a delicate balance of various genetic factors. A change in this balance could only be caused by a "leak" of genetic information, but this is not possible under normal circumstances.'" Zack scowled uneasily, wondering what that meant for him and Sephiroth, only to see the next sentence. "This phenomenon is unique to the SOLDIER Type G…' What the hell is all this?" he asked, turning back to Sephiroth.

Sephiroth was subdued, looking not at the papers in his clipboard, but out of the corner of his eye, thinking. "...it was shortly before Genesis left," he recalled. "The wound on his shoulder was superficial. But for some reason, Genesis wasn't healing. The man who treated him was… Hollander."

Zack didn't like where this memory was heading already, grimacing at the description.

"Hollander claimed the issue was the mako energy that seeped in through the wound," Sephiroth explained. "It was treatable, but he needed a transfusion…" He paused then, lowering his head, the heaviness from earlier weighing on him once again. "I…volunteered. Apparently, I wasn't viable." Turning, Sephiroth gazed at the first tank, with the A-Sahagin, a pensive, searching expression on his face. "Why couldn't I be the donor…?" he muttered. "A SOLDIER Type G…"

"From the sound of this, I don't think you wanna be," Zack asserted, holding up the degradation report. Belatedly, Sephiroth's story clicked a few missing puzzle pieces together in Zack's head. "So, then—Genesis was degrading?"

Sephiroth pondered the tank for a few moments, but ultimately nodded in confirmation. "Project G gave birth to the man we know as Genesis," he revealed.

"Wait. Project *G*—" Zack realized.

"Project *Genesis*," Sephiroth finished for him. "Contrary to the initial findings, Genesis *wasn't* a normal child. He showed clear signs of change."

"The degrading," Zack guessed, moving to stand next to Sephiroth. Then, following Sephiroth's gaze to the tank, he remembered the research Sephiroth found in the Data Room. "...and, copies?" he questioned.

Sephiroth glowered at the A-Sahagin with absolute revulsion. "*Abominations.*"

At the sound of approaching footsteps, both SOLDIERs turned to see a gray haired man in a white lab coat entering the facility. "S-Sephiroth?!" the startled man exclaimed, haltingly making his way down the stairs while glancing nervously around the room.

“Hollander,” Sephiroth acknowledged coolly, “I thought I’d find you here.”

“You want to do something to me, eh?” Hollander sneered, suddenly full of bravado as he eyed the pair. He shrugged cheekily, asking, “But then…who will stop Genesis and Angeal’s degrading?”

Angeal’s—? Zack wondered, only to be distracted by a fluttering noise from above.

Dropping from the rafters was none other than Genesis himself, his pitch black wing allowing him a graceful landing. He flipped his hair out of his face with his free hand, the other holding his rapier at his side.

“Genesis,” Sephiroth uttered, guarded.

Genesis responded by readying his rapier, holding it level with Sephiroth’s throat. His wing extended, blocking Hollander from view. “You won’t take Hollander,” he declared smoothly, just before Hollander bolted for the exit.

Sephiroth turned, ordering, “Zack! Go!”

“Yeah!” Zack replied, charging past Genesis, who oddly moved out of Zack’s way rather than stopping him—as though *allowing* Zack to try. Zack bit down the feeling of being snubbed again, focusing on catching up as Hollander scrambled up the stairs, and out the door.

Zack could leave Genesis to Sephiroth—even with all the bad blood, Sephiroth was still the one who wanted to help the guy.

If someone had told Zack that one of his most infuriating missions would be chasing down an unenhanced, middle-aged mad scientist, he would have laughed. Right now, however, Zack was not laughing. Zack was too busy cutting down what felt like the fiftieth Genesis copy he'd run into since starting this chase through the maze-like Plate interior.

Another A-Sahagin thrust its trident at Zack, who narrowly dodged it. A Blizzara cast at its head was enough to finally knock the damned thing out, and Zack didn’t spare it, or the line of defeated copies before it a second glance. He needed to stop Hollander.

He’s running in sandals*, for f—* Zack thought, just as Hollander dashed

around another corner. They were reaching the edge of the Plate at this point—Hollander couldn't possibly get much farther. Right when Zack tried to follow, he heard the rumbling of machinery quickly making its way closer.

Three Shinra defense machines rolled up, cutting him off from the escaping scientist. A Shot, Cutter, and Pile Machine, all revving their weapons. All with the Shinra emblem crossed out with a bright red X; a sure sign that the mechs were lifted by Genesis's goons over the past several months.

"You've gotta be *kidding* me," Zack groused, drawing his sword again as the blades of the Cutter Machine whirred menacingly.

Zack hurled a Thundara at the Cutter, darting away as it shot at him. The machine leapt forward, and upon landing, sent plumes of gas over Zack. Zack gagged on the acrid stench, unsure if it was just smoke or some sort of bio-weapon Shinra engineered. Holding his breath, Zack dodged in the direction Hollander went, hoping to bypass the machines and catch up.

The Pile Machine zipped in front of him, jabbing at him with its spears.

Abandoning his plan, Zack backtracked, and then rushed between the Pile and Shot Machines to get behind them all. He ran at the Cutter—he couldn't take them all out at once without some help from his limit break. He was going to have to focus on one at a time. So, he slashed at the back of the Cutter, his sword smashing the bulb and disabling the light on its back.

Spinning around, the Cutter swept its blades at him, just as the Shot Machine opened fire.

Zack hastily bent backwards to avoid the worst of it, the blades passing just above him as he caught himself nearly parallel to the floor. He flipped to get upright again, gaining some distance before firing off another Thundara. The Cutter sparked in place for a moment, blades stuttering and revving, before it started stomping toward him again.

Zack narrowly noticed the Pile Machine charging at him, and he moved just enough to avoid its spear, but not enough to avoid getting knocked to the ground. He rolled, and when he righted himself he saw all three machines had formed a tight line—his path to Hollander was entirely blocked off.

The Shot Machine fired its missiles.

I don't have time for this! Zack thought as he dashed forward, under the shots. They exploded somewhere behind him as he slashed away, trying to catch each machine at with the same swipes. If he didn't wrap this up fast, Hollander would be gone. As would any hope of finding Angeal before the army got to him.

Then, as if summoned by the very thought, Zack felt his DMW surge with Rush Assault.

Zack let loose, and when he was done pounding his fists against all that metal, the Cutter had fallen, its panels bent and broken. Zack stabbed at the Pile Machine, carving sharp lines in the steel. The Pile Machine made a jab at him again, and Zack deflected it, only to belatedly hear the hiss of missiles headed his way. Blasted off his feet, Zack landed hard on the floor, his ears ringing. Dazedly, Zack pushed himself up. Shook his head. A quick cast of Cura healed the worst of it, but he felt worryingly disoriented—

He looked up to see the Pile Machine level one of its guns with his head.

Jumping to evade, Zack leapt high over the Pile, and then flipped, mid-air. Using that momentum, he stabbed downward, impaling his sword into the bulk of the Pile Machine. It flailed, on the fritz, and Zack jumped off before it toppled.

Meanwhile, the Shot Machine dispersed more of that same toxic gas.

Zack ignited it with a Fira, the final machine engulfed in flame. Sensing that the spell didn't cause a dip in his mana, Zack fired off more, blasting the Shot Machine with Thundara after Thundara. He cast no less than four before his DMW's boost wore off, and the Shot Machine was a sparking, heaping hunk of junk.

Catching his breath, and his hearing healing rapidly, Zack looked around and saw the coast was clear. The fight done, Zack chased after Hollander. Again.

When he caught up, luckily this time the bastard was so frenzied and exhausted, Hollander tripped, desperately scooting along the floor to get away from Zack.

"Hollander, do you understand what you're doing?" Zack questioned as Hollander managed to get on his feet again, still backing away, past

one of the final support beams of the Plate. Only the open sky was behind him, now. Zack walked toward him, knowing the chase was finally over—

But, before he could reach Hollander, a very familiar, very broad sword appeared from behind the support beam.

The Buster Sword was hardly a deterrent, but Zack stopped anyway, all the more infuriated by the blatant sign of where Angeal now placed his loyalties. “Working for Hollander now?” Zack snarled, shifting to peer around the beam, where he knew Angeal was. “What is it you’re after?”

“World domination,” Angeal replied flatly.

“That’s not even funny, man,” Zack growled.

“How about…revenge?” Angeal suggested, lowering his weapon, but now that Zack could see him, he looked stubbornly *uncaring*, despite their circumstances.

“For *what?*” Zack snapped.

Angeal didn’t respond, walking toward the edge of the Plate.

Hollander, Zack noted frustratedly, had disappeared already. “*Angeal!*” Zack called out, demanding the man’s attention.

Then, abruptly, a massive, white, feathered wing burst from Angeal’s shoulder.

Zack gasped, watching the feathers thrown off from the force float delicately to the ground. There was a second wing, he noticed, just beneath the first. The wings didn’t look as badly mutated as Genesis’s black one. Just strange—lopsided, with no mirrored set on Angeal’s other shoulder.

“I’ve become…a monster,” Angeal grit out. He turned, wings flapping lightly in the air as he glowered bitterly at Zack. “A monster’s objective usually is world domination, or revenge.”

As more feathers flew off him, falling into Zack’s vision, Zack suddenly remembered Cissnei. Remembered the *freedom* wings were supposed to represent. The pressure of being a First Class SOLDIER, along with all these top secret experiments—freedom from it all should have been a good thing.

What's more, despite everything…Angeal was still his mentor.

Zack and Sephiroth set out on this mission to keep Angeal *safe*. To find some way to talk him out of all this. Zack couldn't turn back on that goal now, regardless of how aggravated he felt, himself. Angeal was a good person, deep down, but clearly he needed a reminder. "You're wrong," Zack vehemently denied, walking forward. "Those aren't the wings of a monster."

"Well then," Angeal bit out, with barely withheld rage. He jerked his head at his wings, as he challenged, "What are they?"

Zack slowed his steps just as a feather floated in front of him. He reached out, catching it and holding it gingerly in his hand, the whiteness of it all the more stark, in contrast to his dark, SOLDIER-issued glove. "Angel's wings," Zack determined.

"I see," Angeal stated, glaring off to the side. "Then, what should an angel fight for, Zack?" he questioned, his voice shaking with anger. Then, extending his wings as far as they could go, he shouted, "What do *angels* dream of?!"

Unsure how to respond to such an outburst, Zack faltered. He never saw Angeal this angry, and when Angeal raised the Buster Sword only to throw it down and impale the blade in the floor, Zack winced. With his mentor stalking toward him, Zack unconsciously began backing away, baffled both by the behavior, and the fear he felt at the approach. "Angeal—"

"Angels dream of one thing," Angeal stated slowly.

"Please, tell me," Zack urged uneasily, becoming rapidly and increasingly worried he wouldn't be able to calm Angeal down—not without a fight. If he could keep him talking, maybe—

A flash of sullen sadness flickered across Angeal's face as he slowed. All too soon, he steeled himself again. "To be *human*," he hissed.

Before Zack could blink, Angeal punched him sharply and squarely in the stomach.

The attack sent Zack flying, the power behind the blow only partially blocked by Zack's SOLDIER belt. Zack spun in the air, crashing and rolling when he hit the ground. He finally stopped on a massive grated section of the floor, the wiry steel biting into his skin as he pushed himself back onto his feet. On instinct, he raised his fist as he stood,

defensive.

Only…what was the point of fighting Angeal?

Zack's hands fell to his sides as he scoffed. No way. This was *Angeal*. Sure, that punch hurt, and the look on Angeal's face was…alarming, to say the least, but he couldn't be *serious* about this. Zack wasn't about to fight him when the whole plan was to protect him. Sephiroth had probably already let Genesis get away—Zack should be doing the same, here.

His lack of action only infuriated Angeal all the more. "Defend yourself!" Angeal demanded.

Laughing at the absurdity of the situation, Zack grinned. He shook his head, defiant. Surely Angeal would stop. Would realize how ridiculous all this was, when they needed to just talk things out—

Only, Angeal used that moment to draw energy into his fist, slamming it into the floor.

The gathered magic surged forward, a shock wave battering Zack even as he lifted his arms to protect himself. It was blinding, too—bright flashes bursting across Zack's vision. He stumbled backward, unsteady, on what he thought was just tired, shaky legs—

Then the grates beneath him snapped apart, and Zack fell, reaching out uncomprehendingly as he plummeted from the Plate, into open air.

Florals and Fury

Chapter Summary

> Zack awakens after falling from the Plate, and meets the most wonderful girl. Unfortunately, his time spent with her is cut short, as friendly loyalties begin to unravel.

Chapter Notes

> Finally I can start using the canon as guidelines rather than rules again, HOORAY lmao I've been looking forward to this chapter >:3c Hope everyone's having a good weekend!

Zack dreamt of his mother. Of her kind, patient voice, gently prompting him to tell her what happened. He had, once again, landed himself in a big old mess. Everything was fuzzy, and Zack could only vaguely remember, muttering, “I…I want to help out a friend. But, I don’t know how I can do it…”

“*Hell-llooo!*” his mother—no, another woman’s voice, responded.

“Mom?” Zack questioned confusedly.

“Hell-llooo!” came the greeting again, just as Zack’s eyes fluttered open. The prettiest girl he’d *ever* seen was staring down at him, her thick, brown hair framing her face in long bangs, with the rest tied back in a ponytail. Her lovely green eyes lit up as she grinned, seeing he was awake. “Hooray!” she cheered, backing off a little.

Zack could only stare back at her, at her cute white dress decorated with little embroidered flowers. At the light streaming in from above, gleaming ethereally all around her. This was…not where he was last. He remembered falling. Falling off the *Plate*, no less.

After a fall like that, and waking up the most beautiful sight, his groggy brain could only come up with one conclusion.

“…Heaven?” Zack inquired.

The girl’s eyes glinted with amusement. “Not quite,” she answered. As Zack hefted himself into a sitting position, she held her hands behind her back, comfortably watching him. “Church in the Slums,” she elaborated.

The *church* aspect was far more apparent as he became more conscious, spying the towering columns and wooden pews at the edge of his vision. Still, he couldn't fully take his eyes off the girl. Couldn't resist continuing his train of thought, either, smiling cheekily as he asked, "An angel…?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm Aerith." Turning, she pointed up at broken rafters in the ceiling, where the beams of light were filtering in. "You fell from the sky," she explained, and then turned back to Zack with a self-conscious laugh. "Scared me."

Aerith, Zack memorized. Pretty name for a pretty girl. "So, you saved me, huh?" Zack put together.

"Not really," Aerith denied, spinning on her heel. She cupped her mouth with one hand, bending over to call to the ground. "*Hell-llooo!* That's all I did."

Zack burst out laughing at the display. She was *adorable*. He had to make a good impression. So, Zack did what he did best, and opted for a display of athleticism, rolling backward slightly before swinging himself up and onto his feet.

Aerith laughed lightly as he straightened—a great sign.

"Thank you so much, Aerith," Zack said, smoothly as he could. "I'm Zack." He crossed his arms, hoping he looked impressive as he thought aloud, "I have to repay you somehow."

"Don't worry about it," Aerith declined politely.

"No, no," Zack insisted, making a show of worrying very much about it. He stepped a few paces away, drawing a hand to his chin as he pondered. It didn't necessarily have to be a *reward*, exactly—he really just wanted an excuse to get to know her.

And, what better way to do that, than arrange another meeting?

Zack snapped his finger at his brilliant idea, spinning back around to face Aerith. "Hey, how about one date?" he asked excitedly, holding up a finger for emphasis.

"What is that?" Aerith laughed outright. "Don't be silly!"

Aaand, rejected… Zack thought, outwardly hanging his head. Well, that was certainly a no-go. Zack started walking again, thinking of

what else to say—and, if maybe he should cut his losses and find a way topside, if Aerith wasn't interested. But, before he could even try to redeem himself, Aerith cried out.

"Stop!" she scolded. "Don't step on the flowers!"

Zack withdrew his outstretched leg, only vaguely registering that there were, in fact, flowers under his feet. "Uh. Excuse me?" he said to Aerith awkwardly, noting her fists clenched at her sides.

"Normally, people are more careful with flowers," she chastised, frowning at him.

Growing up in Gongaga, Zack supposed he *did* take them for granted, what with them being *everywhere*. "Well…I guess I'm not normal," Zack winced apologetically. Then, taking another glance at the flowers in question—lilies, he thought—he paused in shock. They were in *Midgar*. Where the land was *barren*. Yet, these lilies were thriving, taking up a huge space of the floor in massive numbers. "You don't see a lot of flowers in Midgar," Zack commented, leaning on his knees for a closer, respectful look. He turned his gaze to Aerith, impressed. "They're like luxury items around here."

Aerith nodded, seeming much happier now that he was praising her precious plants. "They only grow here," she explained, gesturing to the blooms. "Although, I planted some outside my house, too."

"If I were you, I'd sell them," Zack told her. People on the Plate would pay a crazy amount of gil for fresh flowers. "Midgar's full of flowers, your wallet's full of money!"

Drawing her hand thoughtfully to her chin, Aerith looked over her garden. "Midgar, full of flowers…wallet, full of money…" she muttered. After a moment of contemplation, she smiled uncertainly back up at Zack. "Never thought of it that way."

Zack felt the familiar buzzing in his brain from his limit break. Or, maybe it was just excitement that Aerith seemed to have a positive opinion of him again. Or possibly the aftereffects of falling through a roof.

…he hoped it was his limit break.

As Aerith crouched to tend to her flowers again, Zack made his way carefully around the garden. The exit was on the far side of the room—big, wooden doors, which he was sure would lead him to the streets.

He walked that way, intending to go out and get his bearings, at least. Though, just as he was passing the last of the pews, he paused.

He didn't want to leave Aerith without at *least* asking for her number —even if they only ended up as friends.

Glancing around, committing the place to memory, Zack eventually rested his gaze on Aerith again. "So, are you always here?"

"Yeah," Aerith answered, before standing back up. She peered curiously at Zack. "So…where are you going?"

In truth, Zack had no idea. He needed to get topside, that was certain. He hummed to himself, about to admit to his ignorance, when his PHS suddenly rang. "Oh, sorry, one sec," he told Aerith, pulling it out to answer the call.

"*Zack*," Sephiroth acknowledged as soon as it connected. "*Where are you?"*

"Oh! Uhh—" Zack faltered, catching Aerith watching him pensively. He probably shouldn't name drop *Sephiroth* willy-nilly. Especially not when he surely called about mission details, like Hollander's whereabouts. "I'm…in a church. In the Slums," Zack answered.

"*The Slums?*" Sephiroth questioned. "*Hollander made it to the Slums?*"

"No, I got…" Zack winced, unsure how to explain while avoiding all the classified information. "…knocked down. Fell through a roof."

"…a*re you injured?*' Sephiroth asked with concern.

"Nope, fit as a fiddle! This girl, Aerith, helped me," Zack reported, shooting the girl a grin at the mention.

Aerith wore an amused little smile as she caught his eye, and then went back to her gardening.

"*Stay there,*" Sephiroth ordered. "*I'll retrieve you myself*."

"Wh—Seriously?" Zack asked, shocked. *The* Sephiroth, walking around the Slums? He never heard of Sephiroth taking missions down here. Plus, sure, he was Sephiroth's protégé, but he was *fine*. "I can make it back up," Zack insisted, "It's no problem—"

"*You might have a concussion, at minimum,"* Sephiroth retorted sternly. "*Stay put. I'll see you soon.*" And then, he hung up.

Didn't even ask for directions, Zack marveled, slowly drawing his PHS away from his ear, and staring at it. Well, he was certain Genesis must have been off and away by now, if Sephiroth was free to come get him. So, that part of the mission was accomplished, at least. Angeal must have gotten away too, obviously, considering—

Zack's stomach lurched as he remembered the impact of Angeal's punch. The bite of metal on his skin when he rolled onto the grates. The swooping, weightless feeling of free fall—

Quickly shaking his head, Zack was *not* thinking about that stuff. Not when he had to sit tight and wait for Sephiroth to show up. He stashed his PHS in his pocket again, walking back toward Aerith. "Hey, you mind if I crash here for a bit?"

"That's fine," Aerith said cheerfully, glancing up at him. "Was that your friend?"

"Yeah, wants me to hang tight," Zack shrugged. "He's worried I've got a concussion or something. But, I'll be outta your hair once he gets here."

"Sounds like a good friend," Aerith commented. Then, haltingly, she shot Zack a look of concern. "How…*did* you end up falling from the sky, Zack?"

Zack bit his lips together. Not only was he desperately trying not to remember, it was also very much not something he could discuss with a civilian. "Uhh…Accident," Zack supplied, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

Aerith narrowed her eyes at him, her smile a bit teasing. "An *accident*, huh? Doesn't sound suspicious at all."

"It's not!" Zack protested, waving his hands in front of himself. Couldn't have her thinking he was up to something shady in the Plate interior. "I was just completing my mission, had an accident, and fell," he explained, only to wince up at the broken rafters. "…y'know, through your roof."

"What kind of mission?" Aerith asked, laughing like she didn't believe him.

Zack pouted. "A SOLDIER mission, of course."

Instantly, Aerith's good mood evaporated. "SOLDIER?" she repeated,

slowly standing as she studied Zack's uniform in a new, worried light. "…you're in SOLDIER?"

"Se—First Class," Zack corrected himself, belatedly remembering his promotion. He frowned at the frightened expression on Aerith's face. It wasn't how people in Midgar usually reacted to operatives. There were some people who thought SOLDIER didn't do enough, for a variety of reasons, but Aerith didn't seem like one of those.

"And…your friend?" Aerith continued, her hand drawn to her chest. "Is he in SOLDIER, too?"

Suddenly, Zack was worried this conversation had gone very, very south. He supposed there wasn't much point in evading the truth, considering said friend was on his way here. "Yeah…It's Sephiroth, actually."

Aerith's eyes widened in shock. "*Sephiroth* is coming here?" she questioned, only to draw in on herself, nervously bringing her fist to her mouth.

"Is that…a problem?" Zack asked, completely confused. Most people would have been shocked to hear Sephiroth was coming, sure, but not like *this*. Not so full of…*fear*. Aerith seemed like a sweet girl—she couldn't possibly be in trouble with SOLDIER. Yet, with how she stepped a few paces away, glancing fretfully at the exit, she was sure acting like she was.

…or, maybe it was fear of Sephiroth, in particular?

The guy did have a reputation that could be considered intimidating, Zack supposed. Zack might have taken that for granted, too, being so used to getting Sephiroth's thoughtful assistance so often. People always seemed to think he was cold, if they only knew him from the papers, but he was always plenty warm to Zack.

"He's not that scary, honest," Zack reassured Aerith. "You don't have to talk to him, if you don't want to, but really—I work with him all the time. He's not mean, or anything."

Aerith paused, pondering over the words, before she met Zack's gaze again. "Right…you said he's just coming to pick you up. That's all?"

"Yeah—he knows he doesn't *have* to, but he is my mentor," Zack shrugged again. It was kind of nice, when he thought about it, that Sephiroth was so concerned about his well being. Even if it was

unnecessary. “Probably just worried I did something dumb.”

While Aerith still appeared uneasy, she did relax her defensive hand. “He’s your mentor?”

“Yep,” Zack said, nodding proudly. He puffed out his chest a little, sure *that* fact had to be impressive. “Trains me personally.”

Glancing warily at Zack’s sword, Aerith asked, “And you…like all the fighting? Being in SOLDIER?”

“Sure. I’m good at it,” Zack acknowledged. Then, with a pump of his fist, he added, “It’s all for my dream of becoming a hero.”

“Like Sephiroth?”

“Yeah—I…well…” Zack began, the simple question bringing up a surprising number of conflicting feelings.

It reminded him of Angeal, saying he shouldn’t look to Sephiroth for SOLDIER honor. How the papers credited *only* Sephiroth for Fort Tamblin. How Sephiroth himself didn’t exactly strike Zack as the *type* to enjoy the limelight, now that Zack knew him better. The more he recalled, and compared Sephiroth, the hero, to Sephiroth, his *mentor,* the more complex it all seemed. Almost like there were two different Sephiroths to consider.

Did he want to be a hero like the Sephiroth he read about in the papers? Or the one he knew now, who might *also* be annoyed that Zack’s efforts got brushed aside by PR?

Well, that was easy to answer, at least. Explaining was a little tougher. “…yes,” Zack settled on, laughing lightly, “but…maybe not in the way you’re thinking.”

Aerith’s expression was dubious. “Meaning…what, exactly?”

“Meaning…if I get really famous, that’d be awesome,” Zack started, surprising himself with the shift in his priorities. Some *acknowledgment* would be nice, but he didn’t think he needed PR to sing his praises as the best SOLDIER *ever*. He wanted to be the best, but who said PR had to tell him he was? PR didn’t seem quite so…reliable, at the moment. “…I think, most of all, I want to get really strong and help people,” Zack summarized, feeling far more satisfied with that clarification. Then, with a grin, he added, “And travel all over the world, making friends! Not much point getting super strong if I’m not helping my

friends out, y'know?"

The elaboration, thankfully, did the trick. A soft smile returned to Aerith's lips. "…that's a nice dream," she said quietly.

Zack grinned all the broader, relieved whatever worries she had were assuaged. "How about you?" he inquired, gesturing to her. "What's your dream?"

"Oh, I don't really have one," Aerith said, waving her hand quickly to deflect the question. She laced her fingers together behind her back, taking a few steps toward her garden again. "I'm fine with what I have, here."

"C'mon, there's gotta be something you'd like," Zack encouraged.

She took a moment to think, shutting her eyes, her head tilting slightly toward her flowers. After a bit, Aerith smiled again, stronger this time. "I think…seeing Midgar full of flowers."

"Now you're talkin'!" Zack cheered. He gestured broadly at the lilies. "People are gonna *love* these, you'll see! Won't be long before the whole city's covered in 'em!"

Aerith giggled, and then crouched down. She gently lifted a bloom upward, examining the petals. "Not sure I could decorate the whole city by myself," she pointed out.

"True, you'd need some help," Zack agreed, squatting next to the garden and checking the flowers himself. He didn't know much about growing flowers, exactly, but he knew a little about plants. Plus, if he helped out, he'd get more time with Aerith—just like he wanted. "Think maybe I could?" he suggested.

"Maybe," Aerith answered vaguely, though she did perk up at the idea. "They seem to like you well enough."

It took a moment for Zack to realize what she meant, but soon he was beaming at the blooms himself. "They *like* me, huh? Guess I gotta become their new florist, now!" He shot Aerith a cheeky grin, pointing at himself as he went on, "Bet I could do *so* good I'd put you into early retirement."

Aerith laughed, lovely and light-hearted. "They still like *me* better," she claimed, pointing at herself in turn.

Zack made a show of pouting to the extreme. “They do, huh…” he muttered, directing a suspicious stare at the flowers. “Guess I gotta win them over more,” he determined, brightening as he looked back up at Aerith. “Think you could teach me?”

That almost ethereal, beautiful grin was back, Zack noted with delight, as Aerith nodded. “Sure,” she said, “I’d love to.”

Zack got so entranced with gardening and chatting with Aerith, the sound of the church doors opening genuinely surprised him. He perked up from where he was pulling out a weed, turning and then standing excitedly when he spotted Sephiroth striding toward him. “Sephiroth! Hey!” Zack greeted, jogging down the aisle to meet him halfway.

“Everything alright?” Sephiroth questioned seriously, immediately giving Zack a once over.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Been hanging out with Aerith,” Zack informed him, and then turned to gesture at the girl.

Aerith was nervous, Zack could tell, but she stood tall even so. “Hello,” she greeted Sephiroth in turn, approaching.

Sephiroth inclined his head, though he otherwise forewent pleasantries entirely. “Did you notice any injuries when you found him?”

“None that a Cure couldn’t fix,” Aerith said.

“Wh—So you *did* save me!” Zack exclaimed at her, jokingly accusatory.

“It wasn’t anything serious,” she insisted. “Just some bumps and bruises.”

“Any light sensitivity?” Sephiroth continued. “Trouble talking?”

“I’m *fine*,” Zack groused, scowling at Sephiroth, even as Aerith shook her head in actual answer.

“A little confused when he woke up, but he bounced back pretty quick,” Aerith explained, much more soberly than she’d been with Zack.

Sephiroth merely responded with a hum, before he leaned and

inspected Zack's face. Satisfied by whatever he found, he asked Zack, "How's your head?"

"Fine! You're being a real mother hen, y'know," Zack complained, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shooting him a flat, unamused expression, Sephiroth moved his gaze back to Aerith. "Thank you for the assistance," he told her, his voice taking on a softer tone. "I can arrange for compensation to fix the roof."

"Don't worry about it," Aerith waved him off with a smile. "The flowers like it better, anyway."

"…flowers?" Sephiroth echoed, confused until he looked beyond her, and saw the garden. He seemed to forget himself briefly at the sight of the lilies, his lips parting in subtle, yet obvious awe.

"Pretty, huh?" Zack grinned. "Aerith grows them herself."

"Incredible," Sephiroth uttered, and then addressed Aerith again, with a newfound appreciation. "You're quite the skilled florist, growing those here."

Aerith quietly stared at him for a moment, and then glanced at Zack, pensive. At length, she smiled again, and offered, "I can grab one for each of you before you go."

Zack beamed, elated. "Really? I'd love one!"

Just as Aerith went to fetch them, Sephiroth's hand lifted, as though about to protest. He faltered, hand falling right back down to his side as Aerith started selecting. It didn't take her long, but Sephiroth still shifted awkwardly—in way Zack thought might be discomfort—when she returned.

"Here you go," Aerith said, holding a white lily out to Sephiroth.

He took it with strangely stilted movements, drawing Zack's curiosity until he muttered, "I'm…not certain I have a proper place to display it."

"You can press it in a book," Aerith informed him cheerfully. "It'll last longer that way." When she moved to hand Zack a yellow lily of his own, her smile turned a bit sheepish. "And, if you ever want another one, maybe you could come back and visit?"

“Of course,” Zack assured her, taking the flower and tucking it safely into a loop on his SOLDIER belt. Once it was set, he turned proudly back to Aerith. “Gotta help you with Operation: Midgar Full of Flowers, right?”

Aerith giggled, nodding happily.

The ringing of a PHS cut through the air, and Zack patted himself down several times before he realized the noise was coming from Sephiroth.

Sephiroth whipped out his own PHS, and then stepped away to answer, tucking his lily into his coat at the same time.

While he busied himself with the call, Zack leaned carefully closer to Aerith, whispering, “See, what did I tell you? Not so scary, huh?”

“…yeah,” Aerith agreed softly, watching Sephiroth with far more curiosity now, than anything. “Not scary at all.”

Sephiroth, though, frowned at whatever he was hearing on the other end of the line. “The Slums,” he replied. “Zack was—” Frowning flatly as he was cut off by the caller, Sephiroth’s expression soon grew stormy. “We’re en route,” he stated sharply, ending the call. He met Zack’s gaze. “Time to go.”

“Right. Back to work, I guess,” Zack sighed. He grinned one last time at Aerith. “Thanks again for the help. I’ll message you to let you know when I can come hang out again.”

As she walked them both to the door, Aerith was light on her feet, perfectly pleased with the idea. “Maybe next time I can show you around Sector 5,” she suggested.

Plans agreed upon, Zack and Sephiroth headed down the stairs, with Zack following Sephiroth along a path littered by scrap metal.

“Good luck!” Aerith called after them, waving.

Zack waved back, already excited to see her again. When he turned brightly to talk to Sephiroth, though, he found the man wasn’t just back to business—he was scowling. “So, what’s going on?” Zack pressed, keeping his voice low, mindful of the passersby. While some looked excited to see Sephiroth, all of them were giving him a *very* wide birth upon seeing his expression.

“Issues at HQ,” Sephiroth hissed mysteriously. “We’ll talk on the train.”

They sped through the Slums, and Zack tried to take note of areas he wanted to check out with Aerith later, but was thwarted by having to practically jog to keep up with Sephiroth’s long strides. A few of the braver civilians attempted to approach them, but Zack could only shoot them a sympathetic wince and a, “Sorry! On the job!” while Sephiroth completely brushed past them all.

It wasn’t until they got to the station that Sephiroth deigned to interact with anyone, raising his voice to address the Security Officers, who snapped to attention at the sight of him. “We’re ready,” Sephiroth informed them. “Get us topside.”

“Sir!” two of the officers replied in unison, running to the front of the train.

Zack followed Sephiroth inside, noting the car was entirely empty. “You got a whole train to yourself?” he asked, eyeing Sephiroth curiously. He wasn’t aware SOLDIER had the authority to do that.

“Some pressure was involved,” Sephiroth said vaguely, leaving Zack to wonder how he could commandeer the thing with, technically, no official sway over Security. “They aren’t running, with the Plate under attack.”

“Wait—it’s *still* under attack?!” Zack exclaimed, alarmed. “I thought Genesis would’ve just *left* after you—”

“It seems he decided to take the moment as an *opportunity*, instead,” Sephiroth snarled bitterly, moving to hold onto a handrail as the train shook to life. “Lazard called—Genesis is attacking HQ, personally,” he explained. The whistle blew, and as soon as the train started pulling away from the station, Sephiroth met Zack’s gaze again. “What happened with Hollander?”

Right. The thing Zack didn’t want to think about. Zack slumped, sullenly dropping into a seat. “He got away,” he grumbled. “Angeal showed up and blocked me off. He…” Zack’s heart sank at the memory of brilliantly white wings. “…he’s got a wing now, too. Guess he’s also a Type G.”

“…and then?” Sephiroth prompted sternly. “How did you fall from the Plate interior?”

Zack grimaced, running his hands irritably down his face before answering. “Angeal wanted to fight me. I wouldn’t, so…he threw some magic shock wave move at me. It broke the platform I was on—that’s when I fell.”

Sephiroth went silent.

The silence stretched as the train barreled up the tracks, curving its way through the tunnels and up the main support pillar, making its way higher, and higher.

When the quiet went on so long that Zack was beginning to get concerned, he glanced up at Sephiroth.

Only to find Sephiroth looked absolutely *livid.*

“Sephiroth…?” Zack prompted worriedly, taking in how tightly Sephiroth’s arms were crossed. Like he was actively restraining himself as he glared daggers at the floor.

Sephiroth’s eyes snapped to Zack, the fury in them fully apparent. “He knocked you off the *Plate,”* Sephiroth summarized through grit teeth.

“Well—” Zack began, hesitant. “Yeah, but…He’s—He’s hurting. He thinks he’s a monster—He’s confused.”

“That is *no* excuse,” Sephiroth snarled.

Zack wasn’t trying to excuse the action, and now he worried he pissed off Sephiroth irreparably, too. He couldn’t calm Angeal down. Now, with an intensity so fierce it felt like Sephiroth could set the air itself ablaze, Zack had no *clue* what to say. Zack’s hand drifted to the front of his SOLDIER belt as he wracked his brain, his thoughts stuck to the feeling of Angeal’s punch.

He heard Sephiroth take a long, deep breath, and when he glanced up again, Sephiroth’s eyes were closed. It took several more moments, and several more breaths, before Sephiroth eventually calmed down on his own. At least, enough to irritatedly pinch the bridge of his nose with one hand. “To think he’d do something so *idiotic*,” Sephiroth muttered bitterly.

Zack shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I tried to calm him down, I just…I couldn’t figure out the right stuff to say,” he mumbled, though even as he did, he found his own frustration with Angeal’s actions growing. The guy didn’t even *try* talking to him. Not now, not in

Banora. Not before *all* of this mess. "…guess I should've expected I wasn't gonna get anywhere when he sucker punched me," Zack grumbled.

Sighing sharply, fury flaring up again, Sephiroth opened his mouth to say something, only to immediately clench his jaw shut once more. At length, he spoke slowly—methodically, as though choosing his words very, *very* carefully. "You are not to blame for *Angeal's* actions," he asserted, the anger in his voice now clearly not directed at Zack, at all.

Seeing Sephiroth so enraged on his behalf, Zack wasn't sure how to feel. On the one hand, it was sort of nice to him…protective, like this. He had Zack's back in this situation, that much was obvious. Even if it was Angeal—his friend—they were dealing with.

On the other hand, Zack's chest felt tight, his throat choked with the urge to cry as he tried to make sense of all this craziness stacking so rapidly on top of his shoulders.

"I've been operating under the assumption that Angeal wouldn't be so far gone that he would harm his own *student*," Sephiroth explained, every word clipped. "Clearly, I was *mistaken.*"

"I really am okay," Zack reminded him weakly.

"If you weren't so enhanced, Zack, you'd be dead from that fall," Sephiroth snapped, so icily that Zack's blood ran cold. "You were extraordinarily lucky."

It was the last thing Zack wanted to hear.

He didn't want to know that. He didn't want to face the reality that, had he not fallen exactly how and where he did, he wouldn't be here, having this conversation. He wouldn't have met Aerith. That whole waking up to an *angel* thing wouldn't have been a joke.

Zack's gaze dropped, and he stared sightlessly at his own hands, unable to fend off the crushing realization that, if it weren't for luck, his own mentor would have killed him.

The train started to slow, and Sephiroth shifted, readying himself for the battles waiting for them as soon as they would disembark. He glanced over Zack, and whatever he saw gave him pause. Anger melted away to concern, and he grimaced to himself. "…perhaps I spoke out of turn," he muttered.

"…what do you mean?" Zack asked numbly.

Sephiroth's expression was conflicted, but ultimately he placed a hand on Zack's pauldron, leaning to be more level with Zack's gaze. "Listen to me: whatever you feel right now will have to wait. Don't let it consume you," he instructed. "Focus on the fight ahead, and the fight *only*."

"Right," Zack agreed, nodding shakily. "Focus."

"Your job is to clear out monsters, and survive," Sephiroth told him. "Everything else must be put aside."

Everything he felt was so intense, Zack wasn't sure how he was supposed to do that—only for him to suddenly remember Sephiroth doing *exactly* that. In his office. During training. Even today, in the reactor—Right *now*.

Every emotion too powerful to contend with at that moment was put aside, not for lack of caring, but for *self-preservation*.

So, Zack realized, every time he thought Sephiroth was still feeling hurt—still upset, still under duress, still in *pain*—despite the image of composure he displayed, Zack was *right.* He was probably still enraged, even now. Might be exactly as overwhelmed as Zack felt, but he was better at hiding the mess his mind was in. And, he had to be—Sephiroth shuttered his emotions away more times than Zack bothered to count. He was having to do it constantly.

"*You've* been putting it all aside so *you* don't get consumed," Zack discerned, staring up at Sephiroth. "Are you just…pretending to be okay, *all* the time?"

Sephiroth's facade—so determined and forceful, like his posters—broke in an instant into pure, unadulterated shock. "…how do you —?"

The train's whistle blew as the vehicle came to a stop, grabbing both Firsts' attention.

Sephiroth shut his eyes, regretful. "I'm sorry," he muttered softly, and then straightened. The doors slid open, and Sephiroth looked down at him, sympathetic, but quickly resuming an expression as implacable and stern as stone. "The mission takes priority."

"…yeah," Zack replied, standing, and then taking his own, reorienting

breath. He would sort out his feelings later. Sephiroth was right—if he was too distracted in the upcoming fights, even his DMW might not be enough to keep him going.

Clear out monsters, and survive, he repeated to himself, over and over.

Once he felt he had the mantra memorized, he nodded determinedly at Sephiroth. “Let’s go.”

The army had already blocked off the highways, so Zack and Sephiroth ran to get to the Shinra Building. Smoke rose from the streets, from fires set by Genesis’s copies, and the air screamed with sirens and car alarms as they made their way to HQ. It was a wonder the Slums were so peaceful, relatively, when topside looked as if the whole Plate was being torn apart.

“Damn you, Genesis—!” Zack growled when he saw the damaged streets and plumes of flame.

As if speaking the name summoned his copies into existence, several G Assailants charged toward them, curved blades at the ready.

With Sephiroth’s help, they went down in an instant, no match for the combined strength of two SOLDIER Firsts. Almost as soon as they were taken out, however, two mechs zoomed down the road, their long beak-like drills revving as they approached.

Sephiroth blasted them apart with a magnified Thundaga. “I suppose we’ll have to add Moth Slashers to the list of tech Genesis stole,” he observed with annoyance.

All too soon, Zack spotted more copies running their way. “They just don’t let up!”

“There’s a new type in the distance, Sephiroth noticed. “I’ll handle that. Take the rest.”

“Got it!” Zack responded, preparing himself to face off against the six Assailants closing in, while Sephiroth dashed ahead.

The assailants closed ranks just after Sephiroth slipped by them, surrounding Zack on all sides. He wasted no time, picking one at random to strike and break himself out of the circle. His attack hit home, and the first assailant was downed in only a few more slashes. Zack spun on his heel, hurling a Fira at the group, catching three in

the flames.

Tossing knives at Zack, the remaining two assailants darted around him, wings outstretched.

One of the knives cut across Zack's cheek, the other ricocheting off his pauldron. Zack ignored both, charging at the nearest Assailant and knocking its remaining blade from its hand. Before it could recover, Zack slashed its chest, and then carried that momentum through to strike at the next closest Assailant. Another knife flew at his head, and Zack batted it away with his blade.

The others swarmed him like ants, each attacking in tandem. One threw its knife, and another pair rushed Zack to slash at him, themselves. While the flung knife missed, the other two struck true—one slicing into Zack's forearm, and the other his side, narrowly close to hitting the petals of Aerith's lily.

Zack snarled in frustration, spinning broadly in a circle with his sword to drive the Assailants off. The lily was still secure, he noted quickly, but at the rate he was going, he worried he would need a new one before he could even get this flower home. Zack raised his blade, eyes darting between the remaining enemies, when he felt the sudden spark of magic tingling at his fingertips.

His limit break—and the magic wasn't Supernova.

Activating the spell, Zack instinctively drew his hands together, feeling a pleasant, cooling wave of healing magic wash over him. He shut his eyes, feeling transported for a moment—back to Aerith's church, like he was surrounded by the calming sight of her flowers. Safe and secure.

Her well wishing echoed in his thoughts, the warmth of the words sinking into his skin as the magic stitched his hurts back together.

Zack opened his eyes to the Assailants all attacking at once. He rushed them, barely able to dodge their blades as he stabbed and slashed at the lot, but he quickly found their attacks weren't hurting him. The knives that made contact glanced off him, as though repelled. As Zack impaled one of the Assailants, quickly withdrawing his sword as the copy fell, he noted the spell felt stronger than his DMW's Invincibility buff. That only lasted a few seconds. This one was lasting longer, helpfully, and Zack recklessly charged forward into the fray.

Another two copies were down before Aerith's healing wave wore off,

and one of the copies finally managed to make a shallow cut across Zack's arm.

Blasting that copy with Fira, knocking it off its feet, Zack turned just in time to slice deeply through the last Assailant's torso. He carved through it, and the copy crumbled to the ground, its broken, degrading body already dissipating. Zack whipped around in a circle, looking for his next opponent, only to find there were none remaining.

Every copy was dead, and Sephiroth was approaching from up the road.

"Finished?"

"Run the credits, 'cause that's *gotta* be the end," Zack retorted, half-joking, and half-hopeful the assessment was actually true.

"For now," Sephiroth said, not sharing his optimism.

They moved on, but they had barely reached the offramp for the Shinra Building when Zack noticed more movement in the sky. He slowed alongside Sephiroth as the figure floated downward, closer into view. Instead of the telltale black wing of a Genesis copy, though, the feathers falling were white.

Zack stopped walking entirely, glaring up at the newcomer.

Angeal himself, descending from on high, his Buster Sword and arm outstretched as if to embrace them.

When Angeal landed, he stood tall, and prideful. "I need your help," he stated, his gaze moving quickly from Zack to Sephiroth, as Sephiroth swiftly stalked toward him. "Sephiroth—you look haggard," he noted curiously.

"Do I?" Sephiroth questioned darkly.

Angeal opened his mouth to answer, only for Sephiroth to slam his fist into Angeal's solar plexus.

"Sephiroth!" Zack shouted in alarm, rushing to his side.

Angeal crumpled to his knees, heaving, the wind knocked completely out of him.

Sephiroth, meanwhile, stood over him, snarling, "What *exactly* are you thinking, Angeal?!"

Seeing that Angeal could barely catch his breath, let alone answer, Zack came up next to Sephiroth and grabbed his arm, even knowing he'd never be strong enough to actually stop him. "Hey—"

"You knock Zack off the *Plate*, and then you come here and demand his assistance?" Sephiroth continued, but surprisingly didn't resist when Zack pulled him back half a step. "After you nearly *killed* him?!"

"That was—" Angeal strained, struggling to speak between breaths, "not…intentional."

Zack felt a little better hearing it, but worryingly, he felt Sephiroth go stiff. This time, with his hand on Sephiroth's arm, he could physically feel the muscles tense—all that strength, under careful restraint.

"You can fly, now," Sephiroth pointed out, his voice going flat. "You mean to tell me that, at any point in the three *hundred* meters Zack fell, you couldn't *catch* him?"

Earlier, Zack wanted to cry. Now he wanted to hurl. He gripped Sephiroth more tightly, unable keep his eyes from locking onto the white feathers all around them. On Angeal's wings. The wings he just used to gently, safely land.

And I fell through a roof—

"I'll ask again: What were you *thinking?!*" Sephiroth chastised.

"I'm…not really sure, myself," Angeal admitted, finally getting his breath under control. He stood, solemn, as he said, "At times, I feel as if my mind is mired in fog—"

"You think being in a *fog* is enough to excuse nearly killing your own protégé?" Sephiroth snapped. "That it's enough to excuse what happened in Banora?!"

Angeal grimaced at him, like he was annoyed by the interruption. "…I suppose not," he relented. "Regardless, no matter what happens, I must protect my honor. As long as I hold the Buster Sword—"

"What's honorable about *anything* you've done?" Sephiroth growled.

Angeal closed his eyes, turning his head away from Sephiroth.

"Angeal," Zack began, looking helplessly at his old mentor, his mind reeling. "What are you doing, man? Why are you here?"

“I came to ask that you join me, in my battle,” Angeal revealed, speaking directly to Zack, instead. “Our enemy…is all that creates suffering.”

Zack stared at him, uncomprehending. “Huh?”

“Preposterous,” Sephiroth scoffed, “and pretentious.”

Frustratedly, Angeal tightened his grip on the hilt of the Buster Sword. “Then, perhaps I should phrase things this way: It’s safe to assume that Hollander has ordered Genesis to eliminate Hojo.”

“You would know,” Sephiroth said, narrowing his eyes, “seeing as it’s my understanding that *you* are the reason Hollander escaped in the first place. How do we know you aren’t simply here to run interference?”

“I would have hoped joining forces now would help…make amends,” Angeal told him.

“You want to make amends by…telling us to help you?” Zack summarized, all the more confused. He couldn’t wrap his brain around it. Couldn’t wrap his brain around a lot, really, when it came to Angeal. Pushing it all aside was so much harder with the man in question right in front of him, with motivations that seemed all over the damn place.

“Fix your own mess,” Sephiroth demanded. “We have enough to do.” He removed Zack’s hand from his arm before storming off toward the Shinra Building.

“Hojo is in danger—” Angeal warned.

“Forget about Hojo,” Sephiroth snarled over his shoulder. “If you want to do something useful, go drive Genesis off like you should have in the first place.”

As Sephiroth walked away, Angeal sighed through his nose. “In his usual mood, I see,” he observed with irritation, and a lack of surprise.

The statement, for reasons Zack didn’t understand, finally snapped him out of his miserable, confused funk. “Mood?” he repeated, getting irritated on Sephiroth’s behalf. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Angeal jerked his head in Sephiroth’s direction. “He’s been like this for as long as I’ve known him,” Angeal recounted. “Once he’s in a mood,

he won't listen, regardless of what's at stake."

"He—He's not in a *mood*, Angeal!" Zack shouted, incredulous. "Are you kidding me?! HQ is on *fire*, because of Genesis! You abandoned us and joined up with *him,* while Sephiroth's been doing everything he can to try and help you two!" The shocked, baffled way Angeal regarded the information, as though the possibility that Sephiroth would do such a thing never occurred to him, enraged Zack all the more. "You didn't even let us try to help in the first place!" Zack complained, angrily swiping his hand through the air.

"Zack—"

"You didn't tell us anything! You punched me for *not* wanting to fight you!" Zack recounted, his voice trembling as the rage and the anguish building from all these months spilled out of him, all at once. "You knocked me off the damn *Plate!*"

Angeal winced, but said nothing.

"Sephiroth's not in a *mood*, he's pissed off at you because you've been such an *asshole!*" Zack yelled. When Angeal only stood there, in shock, Zack growled in frustration, swinging his own sword onto his back. "Sephiroth's right," Zack decided. "You wanna fight 'all that creates suffering?' How about you start with *Genesis!*"

And then Zack ran, leaving Angeal to stoically stare after him, as the wails of sirens drowned out everything else.

Acknowledgement in Aftermath

Chapter Summary

> The attack on HQ is finally over, and Zack gets a closer look to how the Company handles such a PR nightmare, as well as realizing he and Sephiroth may be in more similar positions than he first thought.

Chapter Notes

> Hope y'all are having a good weekend! Also a big thank you, as always, for all your wonderful comments. I was so happy to see the previous chapter seems to have landed just the way I wanted it to hehe

Eventually, the fires were extinguished. The monsters and mechs were all felled. Sephiroth and Zack returned to the obliterated entryway of HQ, finding Security Officers in huge numbers, documenting the damage and removing the rubble where they could.

A large man in a green uniform stood in the center of the room, barking orders with a loud, booming voice.

Next to Zack, Sephiroth let out a quiet, aggrieved sigh, before walking toward the man. “Director Heidegger,” he greeted.

Heidegger turned, his scowl accentuated by his big, bushy beard. “Sephiroth!” he sneered. “So, SOLDIER finally shows up to do their job, eh? Well, you’re too late!”

Zack glanced awkwardly between the director and Sephiroth, confused. The guy must be the head of Security, Zack figured. But, the fact that Heidegger felt so comfortable snapping at *Sephiroth*, who didn’t even take orders from him, left Zack ill at ease.

“I take it you’ve confirmed that Genesis has ended his assault, then,” Sephiroth responded smoothly.

Heidegger sniffed derisively at the pair of them, looking them up and down as if debating whether they, SOLDIER Firsts, were worth his time. “As it happens, yes,” he eventually said, wearing a sharp-toothed smile. “No thanks to you. Security captured footage of your little friends trying to blow each other up, before they flew off to who

knows where."

Zack's lips parted, honestly surprised Angeal *did* finally turn on Genesis. "They fought…?" he uttered, turning his gaze to Sephiroth.

Sephiroth's eyes hadn't left Heidegger, and if he was moved by this information, he didn't show it.

Zack didn't expect him to, but he made a mental note to check in with Sephiroth, later. Sephiroth's facade was firmly back in place—probably for the foreseeable future, until Zack could speak with him in private.

"Lazard wanted to see you," Heidegger told Sephiroth. He was smug, at first, only to grow rapidly irate as he raised his voice, declaring, "Probably to tell you what I told him: the next time you make my men give you a little *joyride* to the Slums, I'll see to it that the President finds a good Zolom-infested swamp to throw you into!"

Joyride? Zack wondered, only to instantly remember the train. The way the officers ran so quickly to do as Sephiroth ordered. How Sephiroth only explained it as 'extra pressure,' just so he could retrieve Zack.

"There were extenuating circumstances," Sephiroth explained blandly, frigidly calm in comparison. Then, to Zack, Sephiroth simply nodded, proceeding to head directly to the elevators.

"Self-important bastard," Heidegger grumbled after him. He scowled at Zack. "And you—I take it you're the idiot that fell off the Plate."

Zack bristled at the description. "I got *knocked* off—"

"I don't care how it happened!" Heidegger bellowed. "Next time, get *yourself* back topside! It's a wonder SOLDIER gets anything done these days, with punks like you wasting the Company's resources!"

Mirroring Heidegger's grimace, Zack could see why Sephiroth didn't bother discussing the details with this guy. Plus, Zack already failed in calming people down, today. He didn't feel up to trying again. So, instead, he met Heidegger's gaze, silently staring him down like Sephiroth did.

At Zack's lack of response, Heidegger scoffed. "You and the rest of the operatives better start making yourselves useful, now that there's no war we can ship you off to. Security isn't here just to clean up

SOLDIER's messes," he asserted. Then, having apparently decided he'd yelled at Zack enough, he left, heading outside. As he did, Zack could hear him start shouting more orders at the officers stationed by the entrance.

"Good grief…" Zack muttered, shaking his head. He knew SOLDIER and Security had a rivalry going on, but he wondered now if it had less to do with the operatives and officers, and more to do with *Heidegger*.

With the director gone, Zack had free reign to inspect the damage from the attack. Most of the area was cordoned off with caution tape, but the front desk seemed intact. The majority of the damage was to the walls around the front door, the stairs, and the massive remnants of metal and glass littered about the marble flooring. To his left, Zack spotted a trio of officers struggling to lift some of the debris, even with all of them trying to heft the mangled beams together.

Making his way toward them, Zack decided he might as well help out where he could. He was pretty sure he could technically leave, at this point, but he didn't want to. Didn't feel right to leave HQ so demolished. So, after a quick greeting and some coordination between the four of them, he lifted and dragged as much rubble as possible, clearing the entry hall under the direction of Security.

Tired as he was, he felt better cooperating with the others—the less in-fighting he had to think about, the better.

It wasn't long into helping though, that another officer arrived. This one did a double-take at Zack, asking, "Aren't you Zack Fair? From the joint trainings?"

"Uh, yeah. That's me," Zack confirmed, tossing the warped bit of pipe he held into the removal pile. He vaguely remembered the joint training from his blur of missions over the past few months. He didn't remember a single officer's name, though—not even the commander that challenged him in the first place. Zack gave the newcomer what he hoped was a friendly, familiar grin. "Something up?"

"Director Lazard wanted to see you," the new officer informed him.

"I thought he wanted to see Sephiroth?" Zack questioned, glancing confusedly at the other officers, who appeared similarly lost.

"Right. *Both* of you," the new officer clarified. "Director Heidegger was supposed to tell you. I guess he didn't?"

“Probably too pissed off at Sephiroth to remember,” one of the other officers laughed, coming to stand next to Zack. “You know how he gets.”

“Great,” Zack grumbled, grimacing. Had to deal with so much shit today, *and* now he was late. Perfect.

“Your director’s always been more reasonable than ours,” the officer next to him said, smiling. “Just let him know we held you up. Thanks for the help, sir.”

Feeling a smidge better with the observation, Zack mock saluted the group, and then darted off to the elevator.

Despite the attack, the elevator was thankfully in working condition. Minus the little *ding* when it reached its destined floor, though, oddly. Zack stepped off without fanfare, only to immediately hear Lazard’s voice coming from his office. The director’s tone was low and serious as he spoke to Sephiroth, apparently unaware Zack was within earshot.

“The President is…disappointed, to put it mildly,” Lazard stated.

“We only have so many operatives left,” Sephiroth retorted, and Zack picked up on the clipped, strained way he spoke—like he was forcing himself to stay calm, again. “A fall like that could have—”

“Enough,” Lazard interrupted forcefully, only to sigh. “We’re not getting anywhere with this. I know you feel responsible for Zack, but actions like this aren’t good your image. I’m sure you understand where I’m coming from.”

Zack’s throat tightened as he halted, stopping just shy of the corner, where he’d be seen. Was Sephiroth in trouble? Because of…Zack?

“Zack is a First, now,” Lazard observed. “It’s not necessary for you to take such an involved role in his tutelage.”

“He’s still my junior,” Sephiroth argued. “Or, do you mean, I shouldn’t bother assisting my fellow operatives at all?”

“Help them within *reason*,” Lazard stressed. “People aren’t looking to you to be the heart and soul of SOLDIER. You’re not Angeal.”

Jaw clenching at the mention, Zack heard leather creak. He could only think of the punch to his abdomen. Of Sephiroth’s, to Angeal’s.

“If Angeal didn’t intervene when he did, there’s no telling what could have happened to Professor Hojo,” Lazard stated pointedly. “The expectations for you haven’t changed, Sephiroth. Your priority *must* be the safety of the executives.” When Sephiroth didn’t respond, Lazard’s chair rolled briefly across the floor—the director shifting, as he told Sephiroth, “In the future, do not leave the Plate. You’re dismissed.”

Zack was frozen in place, even as he heard the approaching footsteps. When Sephiroth came around the corner, he didn’t notice Zack. The brief second between the office and the elevator was just enough time for Zack to spot the clenched fists—the flash of fury in Sephiroth’s face—until Sephiroth saw him.

The expression was gone in an instant, wiped away like it was never there.

Zack tried to smile at him, even if he could feel the expression fail into more of a wince of sympathy.

Sephiroth softened at the gesture, but he still looked frustrated, to Zack. More tired, now, than anything. His eyes darted away from Zack’s, and then Sephiroth left without a word.

Shaken by his accidental eavesdropping, Zack trudged into Lazard’s office, fully expecting to be next on the list for a scolding. If *Sephiroth* was getting berated for not being on the Plate, Zack was toast. The fact that they both knowingly, kinda sorta defied direct orders? Fine, apparently—Lazard might not have caught onto that yet. But not being present to protect the bigwigs was probably enough grounds to demote Zack here and now.

To Zack’s surprise, Lazard brightened on seeing him. “Ah, Zack. I was about to call. I take it Heidegger didn’t relay my message.”

“Nope. Got held up helping out Security,” Zack explained with a weak shrug. “Sorry…”

Lazard shook his head with a smile. “That’s Heidegger for you,” he muttered good-naturedly, at odds with the tone Zack heard only moments ago. “It’s my understanding that you assisted in driving off most of the copies.”

“Uh…yeah,” Zack acknowledged, wondering if Sephiroth talked Zack up, only to get dressed down himself. “I did…lose track of Hollander, though,” Zack reported reluctantly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Leave that to the Turks,” Lazard told him, glancing at the monitor on his desk. “They’ll find him soon enough. I have other priorities for you, in the meantime.”

“Like what?” Zack asked, shifting nervously. He knew the other shoe would have to drop soon. He bungled the mission. Surely he was getting punished for it—

“The other departments are placing the blame on SOLDIER, considering Angeal and Genesis were ours, once upon a time,” Lazard explained, bringing a hand thoughtfully to his chin. “I’ll need you and Sephiroth to take on missions with a much higher level of difficulty, for the time being. I can convince the president of SOLDIER’s value, but I’ll need your successful results to do so.”

“Right,” Zack nodded, only somewhat following. “Then, Sephiroth and I are taking on missions together?”

Lazard’s brow furrowed in a brief moment of confusion before he chuckled. “No. You’ll both have to take on more, individually.”

“…oh.”

“Think of it as a chance to be more…independent,” Lazard encouraged, gesturing to him. “As I recall, you wanted to be a hero, yes? I’m sure you don’t want to spend your entire career under Sephiroth’s shadow.”

Zack wasn’t sure what to make of the statement. Or the conversation, for that matter. He wasn’t in trouble, as far as he could tell. But Sephiroth *was*. Zack spent all these months working with him, reassured that he would always be able to rely on Sephiroth, but now it sounded like that was…what did Lazard call it? Hurting Sephiroth’s *image?*

You wouldn’t want to shame your mentor’s name, now, would you?

Nodding vaguely at Lazard to at least confirm he was listening, Zack tried and failed to wrap his head around the orders. And Lazard’s comments, with Hojo’s pricking at his brain in tandem. If anything, Zack thought SOLDIER should be trying to reinforce the bonds they had already, in light of everything. Wouldn’t they be better off if they relied on each other *more?* Yet, instead, it sounded like both he and Sephiroth were being told the exact opposite. Like Zack was some kind of…liability, for Sephiroth.

What's more, he didn't feel like he was under Sephiroth's shadow in the slightest. He felt bolstered by their relationship—especially now, with Sephiroth going so far out of his way to ensure Zack's safety. It felt more like Zack had been taken under Sephiroth's wing, until he could eventually learn how to fly on his own.

…though, Zack thought, his mind reeling back to black and white feathers raining down around him, perhaps *wings* weren't the best metaphor.

After a couple days, Zack still felt off-kilter. Like the world had gone sideways, even though recovery efforts were well underway. The entire entrance of HQ was blocked off with scaffolding and construction equipment, last he saw it, but he avoided HQ on his well-earned days off. Staying around his apartment wasn't much better, unfortunately. He was just as listless as before.

He glanced at the yellow lily he got from Aerith, currently occupying the sunniest table in his apartment, in a tall glass.

Could try to see her, Zack thought, simultaneously realizing he should probably freshen up the flower's water supply. And find a real vase for it.

When he pulled out his PHS to text Aerith, though, it occurred to him he still hadn't checked on Sephiroth, either. After that meeting with Lazard, it had been too late to chat. But, considering Zack was still weighed down by everything that happened, he was certain Sephiroth was, too. Either of them could be sent on a mission at any time, so he needed to schedule something sooner rather than later.

Zack shot off the text to Sephiroth, and then went to swap out the flower's water, pondering if Aerith might like a cheesy hello message or a normal one.

In the middle of Zack's musing, Kunsel came out of his room. The Second watched Zack placing the lily back on the table with a wry smile. "Of course you start getting the nice decorations *after* you're scheduled to move out," he scoffed, teasingly.

Zack froze where he was, looking up at Kunsel in bafflement. "Move out?" he repeated, tilting his head questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"Your promotion?" Kunsel reminded him, heading past Zack and into

the kitchen to start making breakfast. “You’re a First, now. You get to move into a fancier apartment all to yourself. Didn’t you know?”

He didn’t know. Zack was sure there must be other benefits he wasn’t aware of, too, if a whole new apartment slipped his notice in the promotion paperwork. Maybe once he saw Sephiroth again, he could ask about other perks to being a First.

But, more importantly, Zack belatedly realized that it meant Kunsel wouldn’t be sharing the space anymore.

“Wait a minute!” Zack exclaimed, straightening as he gestured at Kunsel. “No! I can’t do that!”

“What?” Kunsel laughed, cereal in hand. “Why not?”

“Because I’m gonna miss you too much, that’s why not!” Zack lamented, moving to stand closer to the kitchen. “What about pizza nights? And movie nights! Who am I supposed to bug at 3AM when I’ve gotten back late from a mission and I’m too awake to sleep?!”

“I ‘unno, Sephiroth maybe?” Kunsel suggested through a mouthful of food. He swallowed, and then continued with a pensive expression. “I don’t think he’d appreciate a 3AM Zack attack, though. He doesn’t seem to sleep much.”

Sephiroth *did* get insomnia, but Zack figured a ‘Zack attack’ might be better than the man staring at his ceiling all night. Still, the initial point remained—Kunsel wouldn’t be there. Zack pouted intensely at his roommate. “Promise me we’ll still hang out a lot,” Zack demanded.

“Of course we will, goof ball,” Kunsel laughed in earnest. “We can still see each other all the time. Hell, you’ll have a nicer place, too. Even more reason for me to come and eat all the food you buy with that First Class paycheck.”

While marginally relieving to know Kunsel was certain to visit, Zack slumped anyway, thinking of all the times he really relied on having someone home to talk to. Or bug for a hug. Or just *be.* “It’s not the *same*,” Zack moaned, trudging to and dramatically crumpling onto the couch.

“Tell you what,” Kunsel started, idly gesturing with his spoon as he spoke, “I’ll help you move in, so everything will be nice and cozy for you to play host, immediately. Then, I’ll email you every single day.” His teasing grin turned wolfish. “*Relentlessly*.”

“You already do that,” Zack complained into the cushion, unmoved from his sprawl.

“Yeah, but maybe now you’ll bother to read them.”

That had Zack perking back up, if only to protest at Kunsel over the back of the couch. “How many times do I have to tell you: I do!”

“Your lack of operational knowledge tells me otherwise,” Kunsel snarked.

“I forget things!”

“Oh—on that note,” Kunsel said, suddenly much more serious. “Don’t forget to check with Medical about your First Class boost. I’ve heard the mako level jump can be a real doozy—you’d better ask them if there’s anything different you need to do to prep.”

With much dismay, Zack balked at the idea of managing a mako boost without Kunsel. “Who’s gonna take care of me and make me soup if *you’re* not there?!” he griped.

“Your own soup does always turn out better—”

“I don’t wanna make my own soup!”

“If I’m in town, I’d be happy to help,” Kunsel swears, getting back to his breakfast. “You have multiple friends, though. It’s not the end of the world if I can’t. Just ask someone else.”

Pondering this, Zack figured it was way too early in his friendship with Aerith to ask. Plus, it was far. There were a couple other Seconds and Thirds he knew that might be willing, but when he really thought about it, the person closest to him at this point, who could help with mako boost side effects, was Sephiroth.

Sephiroth was the ideal choice, really—a fellow First, surely used to those treatments. His quarters likely weren’t far from wherever Zack’s new place would be, too. And, most importantly, Sephiroth would be willing to help, if Zack asked. Right?

An important question still remained, however. “…do you think Sephiroth knows how to cook?” Zack asked dubiously.

Kunsel snorted. “According to PR, he’s good at literally anything and everything, so…yeah, probably.”

Before he could further mull on the likelihood of Sephiroth's culinary abilities, Zack's PHS beeped. Checking it, Zack saw that the message was from Sephiroth himself—a confirmation that he was available to chat.

And, curiously, a note that he had a question for Zack, as well.

"Guess I'll go ask him," Zack decided.

Zack went to meet Sephiroth in the Training Room, and once there, he found Sephiroth already fiddling with the VR settings.

Unaware that they would be training, Zack patted himself down, instantly realizing with dread that he forgot his sword and materia. "Uh—" he started sheepishly, noting that Sephiroth hadn't so much as acknowledged his entrance. "Whatcha doing?"

"Turning off the recording equipment," Sephiroth answered as he typed. "We won't need it for today's session."

"Oh…wait, huh?"

Sephiroth didn't clarify, simply finishing his task and then striding purposefully into the VR room.

Following, Zack watched Sephiroth with curiosity. Sephiroth didn't walk very far inside, and by the time the doors behind Zack slid shut, he stopped. Zack stopped shortly after, waiting, but Sephiroth didn't turn to face him.

He did, however, speak. "In the train," Sephiroth began, his back to Zack, entirely unreadable. "You asked if I was…'pretending,' all the time."

"Right," Zack uttered, rubbing the back of his neck. He remembered asking. Remembered the shock on Sephiroth's face, too, in blatant confirmation.

"That wasn't the first time you've made that observation," Sephiroth noted, finally turning a half step, eyeing Zack with a strangely *wary* gaze. It was piercing. Calculating, like the way he watched his opponents.

Zack frowned, getting the sense that this conversation was going to be very important, but with no idea *why*. Sephiroth seemed braced for

battle. "…is that a bad thing?" Zack questioned, unable to fathom how *noticing* the disconnect could be all that dire.

"How did you know?" Sephiroth asked, in turn.

"What do you mean?" Zack countered, baffled. Of course he knew—anyone paying *any* attention would've figured it out, surely. "You were acting fine when it made no sense for you to be fine. You'd be super upset one second, and then *nothing* the next!" He shrugged, and then gestured at Sephiroth. "I mean, *you* were telling me to 'put everything aside,' right? Is it that weird that I'd notice you were doing it, too?"

"Yes," Sephiroth asserted sharply. "It is."

Frowning even harder at the nonsensical answer, Zack crossed his arms with a huff. "Well, it's weird that that's weird!"

Sephiroth stared, not wholly unlike when he was studying Zack's sword techniques, but this time he seemed far more intensely focused on Zack's every expression. Every twitch. At length, that intensity eased, marginally, though Sephiroth's brow was still furrowed as he asked, "Do you recall the first time you showed me your Supernova?"

"Sure."

"I told you then, that other operatives don't treat me as you do," Sephiroth elaborated. "They don't typically make the connection that I'm not exactly as my posters describe, either."

Zack didn't see how they couldn't. "Even if they work with you directly?" he questioned, because surely people would notice then. Sure, Sephiroth was every bit as powerful as the posters said, but he was still a *person* at the end of the day. Had his own thoughts and opinions. Little quirks. And, Zack had first-hand experience now that the stories PR put out weren't *exactly* the truth.

Although, the more Sephiroth seemed to weigh Zack's responses, the more Lazard's comments about the man's *image* rattled around Zack's brain.

"Generally, no. People make their assumptions about my behavior, and continuously apply those," Sephiroth explained, crossing his own arms, as well. "In the past, I've told others explicitly that what PR puts out are exaggerations, at best—or lies, at worst. Publicity. Even with that knowledge, they still don't *guess* my emotions or intentions as

accurately as you have. I haven't been able to determine why that is."

Exaggerations or…lies? Zack mused, wracking his brain for which of the dozens of stories he read as a kid might even apply. Most still seemed accurate, from his own experience with the man. The clash with Lazard suddenly made a little more sense—Of course Sephiroth would run into issues with matching his image, if so much of those stories really were just *publicity*.

But, even more disconcertingly, the fact that Sephiroth was admitting to people that he didn't match that image, just for those people to *still* read him wrong—for Zack to be the *only* one who was guessing accurately—

Zack didn't know what made him so different, either. The observation just seemed logical. Even as he tried to pin down some sort of explanation, he kept recalling being in similar situations, himself—having to keep a brave face around his friends. Unable to explain why he was so upset. Getting chewed out by Heidegger—just like Sephiroth—because the man had already made his assumptions and was sticking to them.

He just…knew how it felt.

"I'd be doing the same thing," Zack eventually explained, though he wasn't sure if the answer was very satisfying. "I mean, I *do* the same thing, kinda. There's been plenty of times I have to pretend everything's hunky dory when it's not." As he continued, he thought of more people. More lies, and dodges, and fake grins, all to not ruin the general mood, or keep SOLDIER and Shinra's secrets.

Sephiroth must know hundreds, if not thousands more, all locked away for the job.

"I just…relate, I guess," Zack determined, shrugging again. "You do it by getting more serious, right? And I…" he trailed off, the number of times he deflected his stress with a smile now dawning on him. A quick joke, or a silly face, to distract from the turmoil. The opposite method Sephiroth used, and yet still, for the exact same reason. "…I get *less* serious," he realized.

A quiet, thoughtful hum was Sephiroth's only response, as he finally dropped his gaze to the side, processing the information.

As Zack grappled with the knowledge that they were doing the same thing, just with different methods, the fact that Zack was the only one

who clocked the behavior still irked him. After all, there were at least two other people Sephiroth was close to, who should have known something so…basic, about him. Yet, Sephiroth was acting as if all of this was a completely brand new experience.

“What about Angeal and Genesis?” Zack asked. “They must have known, right?”

Sephiroth scoffed derisively. “Genesis knew I was hardly the hero Shinra touts me to be. It’s part of why he’s so bitter—he thinks he should be the hero, in my place.”

“What the *hell?*” Zack snapped, angry on Sephiroth’s behalf. That Genesis thought he could achieve that title by murdering innocent people—

“As for Angeal,” Sephiroth continued, more somber now as he canted his head. “…he comes close, at times. He would often guess the correct emotion, but with the wrong reasoning.” His eyes narrowed then, with annoyance at whatever he was recalling. “In retrospect… they may have both seen me as arrogant, more so than anything else.”

In his usual mood, I see, Angeal had said.

The stupid, tactless way Angeal disregarded everything they were dealing with, all because he thought Sephiroth was being *stubborn*. Noticed Sephiroth looked *haggard,* and never bothered to acknowledge *why*. Brushed Sephiroth’s worries for Zack aside, chalking it up to merely being unused to training someone, instead of a valid reason for concern.

Zack fidgeted in place, his own irritation with Angeal bubbling up into an irate swell. Factoring in Genesis and his *audacity,* too, Zack’s jaw clenched as he grumbled through gritted teeth, “I thought they were your *friends*.”

Sephiroth was quiet, his eyes taking on a long, far away stare. “…as did I.”

The soft statement had Zack’s heart sinking in an instant, overwhelmed with guilt. “I’m sorry!” he blurted out, panicking at how thoughtless his own words were. “I didn’t mean—I shouldn’t have said __”

Of all the dumbest, idiotic things he could say to someone dealing with his friends ditching him without a word—

Yet, despite Zack's floundering, Sephiroth shook his head. "It's fine," he assured, but the soft smile he directed at Zack did nothing to ease the resignation in his eyes. "Don't worry yourself about that."

Zack stared at him in open-mouthed dismay for a beat, and then declared sharply, "Well now I'm *really* gonna worry about it!" At Sephiroth's surprise, Zack stepped a few paces closer, defiant as he met the taller man's gaze. "Come *on.* If I'm really so good at reading you already, why would you lie to me like that?! It's not fine at all!"

"I…" Sephiroth began, taken aback for a moment before he turned, apparently assessing his own behavior. After some deliberation, he let out a short, amused huff, a more genuine smile twitching at the edge of his lips. "…I suppose you have a point."

Just as Zack was about to lay into him about having more than just *a* point, Zack's PHS beeped.

Zack dug the device out with annoyance, opening it to find new orders from Lazard. New missions he was meant to prepare for, as soon as possible. As he looked them over, he heard Sephiroth's PHS sound off, as well—likely for the same reason.

"Duty calls," Sephiroth uttered as he read over his own message, already sounding tired.

"Guess that's that," Zack grumbled, annoyed they were being split up so soon.

Sephiroth frowned at him, looking over Zack with some concern, before saying, "I didn't mean to take up all our time, today. My apologies."

Waving the matter off, Zack shot him a grin. "Nah, it's okay. Nothing to apologize for."

"By your own admission, you *also* act as if nothing is wrong, when there is," Sephiroth pointed out, flatly. "Perhaps you shouldn't be lying to me, either."

Zack bit his lips together, not expecting the call out, and unable to stop his own amused snort from escaping. "Shit," he laughed. "Yeah—Fair point." He took a breath, reorienting himself, and then pouted very strongly at Sephiroth. "I wanted to talk more, and I'm… disappointed!" he admitted, even if he couldn't hold his expression, with his own amusement beginning to peek through again. Sephiroth

catching on and smirking himself didn't help. "I'm gonna talk your ear off when we're both done with our missions!"

"Understood," Sephiroth chuckled, and then started to head back out of the VR room. "If I have downtime during my missions to call, I'll let you know," he promised.

"That's perfect!" Zack cheered, walking with him. "Oh, though, probably the most important thing I was gonna ask—If you're in town when I get my First Class boost, d'you think you could stop by?" he asked hopefully. "Normally Kunsel checks in on me and makes me soup, but since I'm gonna be in a new place, by then…"

"I…suppose I could," Sephiroth agreed hesitantly. "Send me the date and time. I'll see if my schedule will allow it."

"Thanks," Zack beamed at him, sincerely. "And, good luck on your missions, yeah?"

Sephiroth smiled, his expression taking on a warm fondness as he replied, "You, too, Zack."

Helping Hands

Chapter Summary

> Zack deals with the many emotions of moving into his new apartment, as well as a worrisome, atypical mako boost. Luckily, he has some support.

Chapter Notes

> I keep telling myself I have stuff to say in these author's notes and then forget by the time I actually post lmao oh well. Hope everyone's having a lovely weekend!

Zack resituated his hands on the large box he carried, maneuvering it awkwardly through the door of his new apartment. He knew Lazard needed him to take on rougher missions, but tonberries? For a chef's knife? There had to be a line somewhere. After the beating he took on that mission, Zack's arms were straining to get this one box to the edge of the kitchen counter. They protested valiantly with every shift of the box's contents, nearly giving out just as he dropped it to the floor.

Kunsel peered over at him from where he was setting up the coffee machine. "That the last one?"

"Should be," Zack groaned, sinking to his knees on the sleek, faux-wood floor. "Why are *books* so heavy?" he complained. "I don't even have that many."

"I'm surprised you have any at all," Kunsel joked, opening the box in question.

Zack shot him an exaggerated grimace of offense.

"Is this a copy of of Loveless?" Kunsel questioned, lifting a thick tome from the pile.

"Yeah, that one Genesis fan club made all its members buy a special edition," Zack explained irritatedly, still irked by the demand. "They didn't make you do it?"

"Oh, right, the one with his theories for the final act," Kunsel recalled, flipping through a few pages. "No, with his and Angeal's clubs talking about disbanding, I didn't really see a point in staying in them."

“Not enough super secret intel leaks for you?” Zack said in jest, moving to another box close by.

“A couple members mentioned sightings, which helped narrow down some movements from the copies. The clubs probably won’t be of use now that PR put out the K.I.A. statements, though,” Kunsel noted, shrugging, and then placing the book back with the others. Standing, he walked across the living room to start setting up the television. “Besides, I’m not gonna waste my gil on another Loveless copy.”

“Fair enough,” Zack replied, frowning as he discovered this second box was full of bedding, not kitchen supplies like he thought.

“So, what’s this I hear about you doing some Third’s mission?” Kunsel asked, his tone full of feigned ignorance.

Zack’s head whipped up to meet his friend’s gaze. There was a pause as he tried to assess how much Kunsel knew, but all he had to go on was the smarmy smirk visible just beneath Kunsel’s helmet. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zack retorted, breaking eye contact and shuffling through blankets.

“Uh-*huh*,” Kunsel said, entirely disbelieving as he went back to messing with the remote. “So, the reason you were in the Slums three days ago, thwarting an illegal, Shinra-brand accessory trade, was *not* because you were helping the Third who was initially assigned,” he summarized, in excruciating detail.

“How do you even *know* all of that?!”

“I have my sources,” Kunsel stated conspiratorially, unbothered by Zack’s accusatory tone. He placed his hand casually on his hip as he tapped through the television settings. “So, why don’t you just tell me your side of things? Before I start roasting you for doing *exactly* what I knew you’d end up doing, of course.”

Keeping his indignant glare locked on Kunsel, Zack dragged his biggest blanket into his bedroom with an offended huff. “He needed the help, okay?” he called out. “He was gonna quit the program.”

Kunsel responded with a grunt of sympathy. “That’s pretty serious. How’s he feeling about it now?”

Straightening out the blanket over his bed, Zack debated whether he should admit to what happened. Kunsel would probably find out anyway. *Apparently*. “Seemed fired up to try the next one on his own,

until he requested that I 'bury him on a nice hill,'" Zack groused.

"*Ouch*," Kunsel laughed.

Zack headed back out to the living room with a sigh. "I think I'm gonna have to get more hands-on or something. He seemed to understand what I was doing the first time, but now I'm not so sure he's learning by just…watching."

"Not all of us can be prodigies," Kunsel noted with a shrug.

"Yeah, I guess…" Zack conceded, recognizing his own ease with the program really *was* atypical. This Third was likely closer to an average operative. Kunsel might have a better idea of where the guy sat relative to everybody else—though, while Zack pondered over Kunsel's knowledge of the Third's plight, there was one specific detail Zack had missed. One that Kunsel might be able to help him with, now. "Hey," Zack started, watching Kunsel carefully while also trying to phrase his question as casually as possible, "Do you, uh…know that Third's name?"

Kunsel finished up with the remote, only to look over his shoulder and frown curiously at Zack. "…is there something special about it?"

Zack braced himself. He couldn't think of a sly way to say it. He would never live this down. So, rapidly as ripping off a bandage, Zack admitted, "I don't know what it is."

"You don't know his *name?!*" Kunsel cackled, doubling over as he turned to face Zack.

"I forgot to ask!" Zack bemoaned. "And I meant to check the mission register this time, but I forgot that, too!"

"Didn't you get his number? You didn't ask him *then?*"

"I didn't have time!"

"What did you save him as?" Kunsel asked with a wild grin. "I know you; there's no way you left his contact info as just his number."

Zack crossed his arms, not meeting Kunsel's gaze as he muttered very petulantly, "Sad Third."

"*Sad Third?!*" Kunsel guffawed, leaning on the edge of Zack's new, Company-provided leather couch as he laughed that much harder.

“It’s just *Third* now!” Zack corrected hastily. “C’mon, you know his name, right? Just tell me what it is!”

Kunsel let out several more bursts of laughter before he recovered enough to say, “Oh, no. No. Can’t do it.”

“What? So you don’t know his name, either?!”

“Didn’t say that,” Kunsel stipulated, holding up a finger. “I definitely know it; I’m just not gonna tell you.”

“*Kunsel!*” Zack groaned. “Seriously?!”

“Zack, you are one of my dearest friends,” Kunsel began dramatically, holding a hand over his heart. “You know I would help you in any way I could, in the most dire of circumstances, with every resource at my disposal.” Then, with a gleeful grin, he elaborated, “This though? Absolutely not. *Way* funnier to see how long you can keep this up without him realizing.”

Snatching one of the lighter blankets from his bedding box, Zack bundled it up and threw it at Kunsel. “*Jackass*,” he chastised, even as he started laughing, too.

Kunsel took the blanket assault in stride, merely catching it and then shaking it out. Draping it over the back of the couch, Kunsel noted, “I should start a bet. I think you *might* be able to get away with this, but I’m sure some of our friends would wager you won’t last another month.”

“Do *not* let other people know I don’t know this guy’s name,” Zack demanded.

“Don’t *worry*,” Kunsel told him, waving the matter off. “I’ll be discreet. It’ll never get back to him.” Then, after a thought, he snorted. “Actually, maybe there is one thing to worry about—how you’re gonna avoid saying his name, in every possible circumstance.”

Zack groaned, loud and long, hanging his head back to glare at the ceiling. “Guess I gotta *really* remember to check that register, next time…”

Kunsel chuckled, moving to search one of the many boxes still remaining, only to pause with his gaze on the microwave. “Oh shit, it’s that late?” he questioned, double checking the device’s clock with his PHS. “Sorry, Zack, I have to head out.”

“Already?” Zack grumbled. It was barely even dinner time. He knew missions could get scheduled at odd hours, but he figured they would have more time than this—his apartment was nowhere *near* guest-ready.

“I’ll bring a housewarming gift next time,” Kunsel promised as he quickly went to get his boots on.

“You already got me the coffee maker,” Zack pointed out, watching his friend with a confused expression.

“That was the *nice* gift,” Kunsel specified, gathering the rest of his belongings. Once done, he grinned at Zack. “I still need to get you something cursed.”

“Oh, great,” Zack drawled sarcastically.

“I saw an Ahriman-shaped toilet roll holder at one of the thrift shops,” Kunsel describes, ever more devious by the second. “Paper comes out where its tongue should be. Maybe I’ll go back and get that.”

“If you do, I’m gonna find a way to sneak it back to your place, and install it over your bed while you sleep,” Zack threatened.

Kunsel only laughed, the pair of them sharing a quick hug before Kunsel headed out the door, calling, “See ya later.”

Zack waved goodbye until the door clicked shut. Then, taking a breath, he took a look around the place. There were boxes all over, blocking off half the living room and what he was pretty sure was a storage closet. A lot of work lay ahead of him. But, it was fine. He was excited to decorate.

It would give him something to do instead of thinking about how the place echoed still, punctuating his every footstep, reminding him he was the only one here.

By the time Zack was halfway through unpacking his clothes, and ensuring his bed would be ready to sleep in, the sun had already set. He glanced at the clock on the microwave, realizing with dismay that there were still too many basics to unpack—his kitchen was untouched, except for the coffee maker. His books sat abandoned. He still had to find and purchase some kind of shelf for them, too. His bathroom didn’t even have a toothbrush. Somehow, even though it was only his belongings to sort, he had way more to unpack than he expected.

He wasn't going to have time to decorate, tonight.

The productive fire he had earlier fizzled into a puff of smoke. The sheer number of things he had left to do, including prep for his looming mako boost, felt insurmountable, now. It was too much to do by himself.

Or, he thought glumly, casting a glance to where Kunsel's shoes and sword had been, *maybe it's just too quiet.*

That quiet would be good later, he was certain. When he was overloaded from mako boosts or an extended mission, or his enhancements were on the fritz, it would be nice to come back to the peaceful nothingness. Living completely on his own for the first time would be a brand new, exciting experience.

For now though, it felt more like the silence itself was threatening to swallow him whole.

Zack pulled out his PHS, thinking to at least text Aerith. His schedule was too packed to go see her, but she might be up for a chat. He could talk to her while he unpacked stuff—listen to her stories about the Slums.

Just as he got to her name on his contact list, though, he paused at the next entry.

Angeal Hewley.

Last message, months ago. From Zack, to Angeal, just like the dozens of questions before it. Unseen.

He was supposed to be here for this, Zack thought miserably, clutching his PHS. Angeal should have been celebrating with him. Would've congratulated him for his promotion, at least. Probably would've offered to help with the move, but now…

Now all Zack could think about his how Angeal pushed for this promotion, *knowing* he wouldn't be there to see it through.

Zack wasn't sure if he even *wanted* Angeal to be here, with how things stood between them. With how Angeal brushed off both Zack and Sephiroth's concerns. Repeatedly. Even after confirming Angeal finally fought Genesis off, Zack's stomach twisted with too many conflicting emotions every time he thought of his old mentor.

Opting to ignore the contact and just message Aerith, Zack shot her an upbeat, chipper hello to get a conversation started, despite his scowl never leaving his face. Tiredly, Zack dragged his hand down his face, in a vain attempt to reorient himself. “Still got a lot to do,” he muttered with a sigh, casting another glance around his apartment.

He meant to go greet his new neighbors, as well, but that was also seeming less likely. Zack was fairly certain the Firsts were all tied up on missions, anyway—like Sephiroth. Sephiroth must live nearby, too. This floor, or the next. Zack could console himself with having *one* person he knew close at hand, even if he wasn’t currently home.

Zack’s eyes roamed over his boxes of essentials and memories, mentally tallying everything he was suddenly far too drained to do, feeling more alone than ever.

“You don’t have a mako boost scheduled today,” the Medical receptionist informed Zack, frowning perplexedly at her monitor.

“But the email said I did…?” Zack insisted, worried, and about to pull out his PHS to triple-check. He already sent the date and the access code for his apartment to Sephiroth. If he was wrong—

“*Oh,*” the receptionist uttered after a few clicks, her eyebrows raising at whatever she was reading. She hesitated, lips parted as she parsed the information. “You do have one, just not with Medical,” she amended carefully. “It says here you’re supposed to report to R&D—68th floor.”

“R&D?” Zack echoed, baffled. Medical was always in charge of routine boosts. R&D only got involved with the initial procedure, when someone first joined SOLDIER.

“The appointment is with Professor Hojo,” the receptionist clarified, turning her own anxious gaze to Zack. “You’re going to want to hurry.”

Hojo?! Zack internally lamented, glancing at the clock on the wall in a panic. He was barely on time getting to Medical—he was going to be late for sure. “Uh, okay, thanks!” he babbled quickly, and then ran out the door.

The elevator was quick in reaching his floor, but even as it brought him to the 68th, Zack paced with newfound stress. This wasn’t the plan. Why would Hojo be doing his mako boost? The rumors swirling

around SOLDIER were clear enough about the guy never taking an interest in regular operatives. He only did *Sephiroth's* boosts—

Then Zack recalled the keen, creepy smile Hojo wore, when the man vowed to remember Zack's name.

It'll be fine, Zack told himself, even as his dread rose along with the elevator. *It's just a mako boost. I've had tons of those before. It can't be that different.*

Just as it occurred to him that he should probably tell Sephiroth what was happening, the door opened to the main R&D lab.

Zack spotted Professor Hojo immediately, the scientist too preoccupied reading from a screen to even notice the new presence. Approaching, Zack eyed the various large machines with trepidation—in particular, a giant, glass cylinder with the word 'SAMPLE' written across a massive entry door. He knew R&D supposedly researched fiends, but seeing a container big enough to squish a behemoth into made Zack that much more uneasy. Reaching Hojo, Zack greeted him with a wary, "Uh…Professor?"

"I believe I made it clear not to interrupt me while I parse the latest Subject S data," Hojo snapped, glowering at the screen rather than meeting Zack's gaze.

"I'm…here for my mako boost?" Zack tried awkwardly, leaning to catch the man's eye.

Hojo did look up then, peering at Zack with disinterest, and looking him up and down before recognition dawned on his face. "*Ah*," he began, a sick smile spreading over his lips. "Yes. The protégé." Shaking his head, he added, "When you didn't arrive on time, I'd assumed you must have perished due to your own, sub-par abilities. Though, I suppose you're here in an attempt to remedy those, yes?"

Zack scowled at the brazen insults. He should have expected as much. "Just the boost," he corrected, crossing his arms over his chest. "Once that's done, you can get right back to your research."

"Oh, I'm not sure a simple mako exposure would be enough to make up for what *you* lack," Hojo scoffed, waving Zack off. "I've already reviewed your file—I must say, not very impressive. The results were barely above average."

Bristling, Zack clenched his jaw, biting down on the infuriated insults

he wanted to hurl back at Hojo. He was a *prodigy*, dammit. There was no way his results were as low as the professor was making them out to be.

When Zack didn't reply, Hojo regarded him with a curious expression. "Tell me—what is Sephiroth's opinion of your potential?"

More important than yours, Zack thought spitefully, his ire eased by the memories of Sephiroth's praise. How Sephiroth truly seemed to just enjoy teaching him. How, even with setbacks and unknowns, Sephiroth took so many pains to ensure Zack could succeed in the field. Rather than relaying of any of those, however, he flatly told Hojo, "Should ask him yourself."

Disconcertingly, Hojo only responded with that same, sly smile. He let out a hum, turning back to the device he was reading off of, and pressing several icons. "Well, if you're planning on following Sephiroth's footsteps, we're going to have to give you a fair number of enhancements."

After another press of a button, the door to the sample container hissed, and then slid open.

Hojo gestured to it. "Step inside, SOLDIER," he instructed.

"What for?" Zack questioned uneasily. The container was way too big for an exposure. It would be a waste of mako to fill up the whole thing.

"Do you mean to waste my time *and* yours?" Hojo countered, sneering. "It's only a simple experiment—one that *should* increase the efficacy of your exposure."

"*Should*," Zack repeated dubiously. "Not *will?*"

"That depends on your genetics. Nothing to concern yourself with. Now," Hojo shooed him toward the container, "go on. You *do* want to be cleared for your First Class assignments, don't you?"

Seeing that Hojo wasn't going to back down, Zack reluctantly made his way to the container. *How can I not be concerned?* he wondered, stepping cautiously inside. Looking around, he saw several flat bulbs built into the frame. Little divots he thought might be holes—perhaps for mako, or air. He didn't know of any other way to enhance his abilities within SOLDIER, though, barring boosts.

As he was pondering, the door slid shut, locking firmly in place.

"…Hey," Zack said, voice flat with irritation, "you gonna explain any of this?"

"Everything in time," Hojo's voice crackled over a speaker inside the container. "Now, answer the following questions. Currently, which do you admire more: a SOLDIER operative like Sephiroth, or a SOLDIER operative like Angeal?"

Zack glowered at him from behind the glass, confused and distrustful of the question. He didn't see much choice in answering, though. The sooner they finished up Hojo's weird little game, the sooner he could get his boost and hopefully *never* be back here again. Zack weighed his options—he joined SOLDIER to be like Sephiroth. Seemed like the obvious choice.

And, after the bullshit Angeal had pulled, lately, he wasn't feeling so keen on becoming an operative like Angeal.

"…Sephiroth," Zack answered.

Hojo's face was distorted, but Zack was certain the man was pleased with that answer. "What do you think Shinra needs most at this moment?" the professor continued. "Many powerful SOLDIER operatives, or state-of-the-art science and technology?"

Zack's instinct was to say operatives—after all, they were all drowning in overwork, with all the desertions. They needed more people. More coverage.

But, as Zack opened his mouth, he hesitated. This was *Hojo* he was talking to. *Director* of R&D. The guy looked down on any operative that wasn't Sephiroth, it seemed, and cared more about his experiments than anything. It might be better for Zack, in the long run, to answer according to what Hojo likely wanted to hear.

So, Zack replied, "Science and tech."

As he suspected, Zack saw Hojo's shoulders shaking with mirth. The obvious sign of his success still wasn't comforting. The speaker crackled again, as Hojo asked, "Which do you believe to be more befitting a SOLDIER member: a person who gives all to Shinra, or a person unafraid to *challenge* Shinra?"

Uncertain which way Hojo's biases lined up for that question, Zack

dropped his gaze, wracking his brain. He was always trying to give his all. In every aspect of his life, really, but definitely at work. Especially in battle. But, that wasn't quite how Hojo phrased it.

Giving *all* to Shinra…?

The thought of it made Zack's stomach twist uncomfortably. Did he mean give up everything for the Company? Like, his life, for the job? Zack knew he ran the risk of dying on a mission, but he wasn't doing it for Shinra. It was for his own goals of being a hero. For SOLDIER. For his *team*.

Plus, he supposed, challenging the Company wasn't necessarily a bad thing, right? If they gave shitty orders, like they did with the whole Angeal and Genesis debacle, then yeah, he wasn't going to always comply. The Company should listen to push back from its employees —the president was just a person. He wasn't always going to be right.

"Someone who challenges Shinra," Zack decided, looking back up at Hojo.

"Ahh…You are a most *promising* SOLDIER member, after all," Hojo praised, and began fiddling with the device again. "As promised, you will be physically enhanced."

That was all the warning Zack had before the lights in the container went blindingly bright. Zack let out a yelp, crouching and shielding his eyes in a vain attempt to defend himself from whatever weird experiment Hojo was conducting. He squeezed his eyes shut tight against the whiteness, hearing the loud whirs of machinery.

And then, suddenly, it all stopped.

The machine powered off. The light was gone. Zack was fine. In fact, he felt absolutely no different from before.

The door to the container slid open, and when Zack checked, he could see Hojo waiting expectantly for him to exit.

Zack did, slowly, flexing his hands as he straightened. His shook out his arms, trying and failing to detect any new sensations in his limbs. "I thought I'd feel a surge of power, or something," he told Hojo as he walked out, even more miffed at the experience.

"Alas, those are the limitations of your cells," Hojo lamented blandly. "Or, perhaps…you would like to be altered to the point of

degradation? Like some second-rate scientist's test sample?"

Zack felt slightly closer to Sephiroth, having put up with this jerk's twisted sense of humor for even this short amount of time. If Sephiroth had to deal with it constantly, Zack could see why Sephiroth was so disdainful of him. And why Sephiroth instructed Zack to stay away from Hojo in the first place. So, with an impatient grimace, Zack crossed his arms and asked, "So, my mako boost…?"

"Yes, yes," Hojo chuckled, beginning to walk to the opposite side of the lab. "We are already behind schedule, after all."

Following, Zack willed himself to ignore the reference to his own lateness. He was going to have to ask Sephiroth how he handled Hojo. There had to be some sort of trick to withstanding all this relentless poking and prodding. It was like the guy lived for pissing people off.

Hojo led Zack through a few sets of doors, coming to a smaller room with several of the pods Zack was more familiar with. They looked nearly identical to the ones in Medical—big, single-person glass tank with metal reinforcements, pipes soldered to the floor for piping in mako, and a small container for valuables built into the side—but the diagnostic pad beside each one looked more complicated, as Hojo booted up the nearest. The basic selections Zack usually saw in passing were dwarfed by dozens of other options, and Zack didn't have time to read any of them before the pod opened.

"I'm sure I don't have to explain what to do next," Hojo said, shooting Zack a smarmy smirk. "Or, do I?"

"I got it," Zack informed him, his tone clipped as he emptied his pockets into the storage container, and then made his way into the pod. He stood right in the center of it, like he was used to doing, but the familiarity of the process ended there. Now that he was standing in it, and the door was closing, Zack noticed these pods were more offset than the ones in Medical—those lined the wall, scrunched up next to each other to handle multiple operatives as needed. These had more space around them—enough for researchers, or Hojo, to walk around and examine every angle.

It felt…exposed.

As Hojo typed away on the controls, the various parts of the pod hissed to life. There were several ominous clunks, and then mako began to bubble in, quickly submerging Zack's boots. As it filled, Hojo watched Zack intently, radiating smug superiority.

Zack didn't try to keep eye contact with him, willing the tank to fill faster. This would all be over soon. Just a quick nap in the pod, and he would go home, right as rain.

…Well, overstimulated and queasy, probably, for a day or two, but otherwise definitely and totally fine.

He already felt nauseous as the mako rose over the tips of his fingers. *Just nerves*, he told himself. *Normal mako boost nerves*. He tried breathing deep, and slow, despite his heart continuing to pound as the mako rose ever higher. Yet, the sight of brilliant, glowing green rushing over his chest had him instinctively preparing to hold his breath.

This was always the part he hated most—his body convinced he was about to drown.

It's not water, he reassured himself, eyes shutting as the tank finally filled to the top. *It's mako. I can breathe. I'm fine. Everything's fine.*

When he opened his eyes again, his vision was engulfed in that green, but he could still see through it—could still see Hojo, now right in front of the tank, peering up at him with a wide grin.

Forcing himself to breathe, Zack immediately shut out the sight of him, trying to relax. He just had to float for a while. Sleep. He wouldn't think about how he wasn't in Medical. Or, as he realized with sinking dread, how Sephiroth didn't know about the change in location. Sephiroth wouldn't be by to see him until after Zack got back to his apartment, surely. Zack would worry about it later. He wouldn't think of the stress and pain already starting to pinch into his pores.

He wouldn't think about how isolated he felt in this tank either, with no one but Hojo around. Wouldn't think about how Hojo was probably still standing there, watching, the burn of his gaze quickly muddled and confused with a burning under Zack's skin. Zack felt himself grimace, trying to banish every thought, especially that of Hojo—of the scientist's shoulders still shaking with laughter.

He was *fine*, here. He would be fine, and then he would go home. He would see Sephiroth. And everything would go back to normal.

Home, Sephiroth, normalcy.

Home, Sephiroth…normal…

Repeating those events to himself, Zack's thoughts began to slow, until eventually, finally, he surrendered himself to unconsciousness.

Zack woke up in pain.

He expected it, with his nerves set to be extra sensitive, but every twitch of every muscle *hurt*. Every sinew stretched and shrank with immediate, flinching agony, like all of his nerve endings were set ablaze. Breathing was worse, and Zack's eyes fluttered open as he forced himself to inhale, despite the burning, bruising sensation in his entire torso as he did.

His vision was blurry, but he didn't care, all thoughts focused on any possible way he could *not* move. *Not* breathe. Anything to *stop* the lightning shooting through him with each and every moment.

A drumming, pounding sensation banged in his chest—his heart, he realized, the sound of it drowning out everything else. Each thud like a gut punch. Each beat slammed against his insides, like his organs wanted to break free.

Zack felt every muscle in his throat spasm as he choked, the pain lancing up and down his body as he struggled to remember where he was. Why he was hurting. What was making everything so damned *green—*

Loud, angry, unintelligible voices rang out around him, and Zack squinted, trying to find the source. He was going through *enough*. Who was making such a *racket—?*

Glancing around, Zack saw a metal floor—the lab. Saw a man wearing white, with long black hair, gesturing irritatedly at Zack as he spoke—

Hojo, he remembered.

And to Zack's opposite side was another man, this one in black, with gray—silver hair, and his fists clenched at his sides as he spoke to Hojo—

…Sephiroth?

Zack couldn't focus. The words were too garbled. Too loud. His head hurt even trying to listen—trying to *see*. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing it all away again. Everything hurt too much. Everything was *too much—*

The sharp, echoing beep of a keypad woke Zack next, and he flinched, whole body spasming. Only, rather than stretching from the sprawl he expected, he felt locked into position. Crunched, and held there by something, every inch of his skin feeling like it was being poked with needles. The sound of a door slamming—or, was it only clicking?—shut pounded on Zack's eardrums. The pounding of his heart was quieter, he noticed, though the deafening beat oddly came from only his right, warmer ear.

Zack groggily recalled he only felt this bad after a mako boost—a mako boost he definitely had, clearly, but…

An overpowering smell of *leather* hit Zack's nose as he shifted. Or, was shifted. Blearily, his eyes opened to the unsteady sight of a wall. Then it moved to the rest, to a living room full of boxes—what he thought might just be his apartment. He was floating through it. Somehow. The disorienting swoop in his gut as he was moved further inside made him want to hurl, but Zack swallowed it down, with effort. The sharp, awful taste of mako didn't help.

There were other strong scents, he noticed. Something floral. Some kind of metal polish.

Zack's head lolled to the side, his gaze focusing onto a bulky plastic bag sitting on the kitchen counter.

He had no idea what was inside. He didn't want to know. Didn't want to think. He didn't want to exist, with all the swooping and floating, with the pain, and the noise, and the smells, and the—

Everything went dark again, drawing him back into oblivion.

The next time Zack woke, he was in his bed.

While every movement still ached, Zack knew immediately he was past the worst of the exposure. Yes, even his bones still hurt, and every sense was sensitive, but he wasn't in the same agony as before. Squinting exhaustedly at the bland, still undecorated wall, Zack's brain stuttered as it started up again.

…*how the hell did I get home?* he wondered.

Because home was definitely where he was. He was tucked up under his favorite, coziest blankets, which he prepared before he left for his

appointment. Shifting his feet, he could feel his clothes were dry. Must have dried before he ever went to bed. He did wonder where his boots and belts got to, though. Zack maneuvered himself up with shaky, aching limbs. He was going to need food soon, and—

His plans paused at the inexplicable sight of a glass of water on his bedside table.

Marveling at it, Zack once again wondered what the hell was going on. He was too out of it at the lab to have gotten home so miraculously. Did *not* have the coordination to fill a glass upon arriving, either. Let alone put himself to bed. Unless…this was some weird, mako-induced dream.

Movement in the next room caught Zack's attention immediately.

Footsteps. Away from his room, toward the living room. The creak of leather furniture.

Gingerly, Zack got out of bed, wincing with every step. Someone was here. They must've helped him, right? Zack couldn't think of any other explanation as he carefully, quietly—to spare his oversensitive ears—opened the door to the living room.

Sitting on Zack's couch was Sephiroth, who stared at him with surprise. "You're up," he observed in a low, quiet voice, shifting to move something Zack couldn't see before standing up himself. "Feeling alright?"

"Well," Zack croaked, his throat dry and irritated, "everything feels like shit, but I don't want someone to take me out to make it stop, anymore."

Sephiroth frowned, concernedly.

"What…happened?" Zack asked, holding onto the door frame for support.

Instantly, Sephiroth's expression darkened with frustration. "I went to Medical to verify how much longer your procedure would be. They informed me you were with Hojo."

Zack squinted at him, sluggish thoughts recalling the slimy bastard talking to Sephiroth while he was in the tank—so, that hadn't been a dream, then. "You came to get me?"

“Of course,” Sephiroth stated firmly, grimacing as he, too, recalled the events while Zack was out. “…I’m sorry,” he said, ultimately, through clenched teeth. “This is my fault.”

“Huh?” Zack uttered, head tilting as he struggled to keep it upright. It felt so *heavy*, but Sephiroth wasn’t making sense. Zack was pretty sure it wasn’t just the mako addling his brain, making things hard to comprehend. “What do you mean, *your* fault?”

“I shouldn’t have let things come to this,” Sephiroth told him, not meeting Zack’s eyes. “I know better than to let Hojo know I—” He cut himself off, then, only to frustratedly shake his head. “I’ll speak with Lazard. With Hojo’s position as a Director, we may not be able to ignore his orders, but there might still be a way to schedule your boosts with Medical from now on.”

Sephiroth looked so disappointed with himself, Zack could only think of cheering him up somehow. He didn’t understand how any of the day’s events had to do with Sephiroth, anyway—it wasn’t his fault Hojo was such a creep. “I did kinda talk to Hojo a while back,” Zack admitted, certain that talk had more to do with Hojo’s focus than anything Sephiroth could have done. “It was…weird, but nothing really happened, so I didn’t think much of it. But, he did say he’d remember me.” Zack shrugged one shoulder, only to wince. “…pretty sure *that* was why he did this, not you.”

“He wouldn’t have taken an interest in you at all, if it weren’t for me,” Sephiroth muttered bitterly.

The professor *did* have a strange fixation on Sephiroth, Zack had to admit, thinking of all the times Hojo mentioned Sephiroth during their talks. How he questioned if Zack wanted to be like Sephiroth. How he was so insistent Zack not make Sephiroth look bad.

As he thought of those, Lazard’s comments returned to the forefront of his mind, too—about being under Sephiroth’s shadow, and how he should be more independent.

“Am I…holding you back?” Zack asked tentatively. At Sephiroth’s baffled expression, he elaborated, “Just…Hojo kept saying stuff about how I couldn’t measure up to you. Feels like I’m…I dunno, a liability or something.”

Sephiroth’s lips parted, and his gaze flicked away, as if…ashamed. Just as Zack was beginning to worry that really *was* the case, Sephiroth said, “It isn’t anything to do with you, Zack.” He grimaced,

shifting to cross his arms. "…it's Hojo. Whenever I take an interest in anything, he likes to involve himself."

"…why?"

"Because if he knows I care about something, he can use it as leverage," Sephiroth stated mechanically, his eyes taking on a glazed, exhausted look.

All the jabs about Zack's capabilities, and the suspicions that Hojo did the same to Sephiroth, clicked together like puzzle pieces. Hojo tried to get under Sephiroth's skin in the same way. Tried to get reactions, all for whatever sick games he had in store. Little manipulations of Sephiroth's behavior and his feelings, using anything he cared about against him.

And now, he was trying to use *Zack* to do it.

"He's an *asshole*," Zack growled, ignoring the pain it brought to his throat.

Sephiroth snapped back to the present moment, only to huff, amusedly. "That, he is."

"I should punch him the next time he tries any science-y shit on me," Zack decided grumpily. "Say it's a reflex, or something. *Totally* not on purpose."

Sephiroth, apparently caught off-guard by the impending threat to Hojo's person, snorted, and then covered his mouth as he chuckled. "I can't recommend it," he said, eyes glimmering with mirth as he smiled at Zack, "…but I understand the sentiment."

"Could break some of his fancy equipment, too," Zack continued, only half-jokingly as he recalled the various bits and bobs in the lab. All of which would *easily* shatter, when faced with the strength of a First. "I'm clumsy," Zack pointed out. "People will believe me if I say it was an accident."

"You should stop telling me your schemes if you want any plausible deniability," Sephiroth jested in turn, in significantly better humor. "You seem to be doing better," he observed, "since you're well enough to plot revenge."

Zack grinned weakly. He did feel better, but he was in no way back up to full strength. Definitely could use some soup, like his typical boost

routine called for. “Did you bring food?” he asked Sephiroth. “I think I remember seeing a bag, but everything’s, uh…hazy.”

“I did,” Sephiroth confirmed, moving to the kitchen to raid the fridge. “I picked up a few soups from the Mess—I wasn’t sure which you’d prefer.”

Mess food wasn’t *great* food, but it would do. Zack couldn’t help but smile anyway, as Sephiroth took out three big to-go bowls. ”Any chicken noodle?” Zack inquired, settling himself on the couch. There was a laptop on the far seat, Zack noticed—Sephiroth must have brought his work with him.

Sephiroth checked the labels on the lids, and then nodded, grabbing the middle container and setting about heating it up in the microwave.

Watching him from over the back of the couch, and covering his ears at the sharp beeps, Zack wondered if Kunsel’s guesses about Sephiroth’s culinary skill were accurate. PR put out a lot of bullshit, after all. And keeping Sephiroth talking helped distract him from the pain he was in. “Do you cook at all?”

“No,” Sephiroth answered plainly as the microwave hummed to life. He turned to face Zack, leaning on the back counter to address him. “Were you expecting me to?”

“Just curious,” Zack shrugged softly, perching his head on one of his soft blankets, rather than leather. “Is it like, a no time thing, or a *can’t* cook thing?”

Sephiroth hesitated, briefly, before ducking his head and admitting, “…a ‘can’t cook’ thing. Unless you include basic hunting skills.”

“For real? You never learned?”

“There was never a need.”

“Don’t tell me you just eat Mess food and the nutrient packs they give us,” Zack scoffed with amusement.

“Alright,” Sephiroth said with his own, wry smile. “I won’t.”

Zack laughed, flinching as the pain flared in every part of him, but unable to help himself. “Can’t believe there’s something I know how to do that you don’t,” he teased.

“I’d wager there’s quite a fair number,” Sephiroth commented idly. “My specialties lie mostly in warfare and culling monsters.”

“And nursing mako-sick juniors back to health,” Zack added with a cheerful chirp.

Sephiroth’s eyes widened marginally in surprise. “…I can’t imagine I have the best bedside manner.”

“I think you do,” Zack insisted, pouting at him, noting inwardly that Sephiroth’s voice had been carefully soft this whole time, probably because he knew how sensitive Zack’s hearing currently was. “You’re cheering me up a lot.” But the way Sephiroth turned his face away again, almost *bashfully* so, had Zack wondering, “Haven’t you done this before?”

“Mostly field dressings,” Sephiroth answered. “Never…soup,” he specified, chuckling.

The sheer length of Sephiroth’s career made the statement hard for Zack to believe. His mind drifted to Angeal again, and Genesis—Angeal was the one who clued Zack in as to where he could get decent ingredients, for cheap. He cooked, and liked to take care of his teammates. Surely, being friends, Sephiroth had experience through him?

He hesitated in asking, though, considering how sore of a subject it was.

Sephiroth caught him in the act, smirking at Zack’s pensive frown. “Something on your mind?”

“…Angeal,” Zack relented. “Would’ve thought him or Genesis would ask you for a check-in every once in a while.”

Sephiroth wore the briefest flash of regret before the microwave started beeping. He turned it off immediately, sparing Zack from the worst of the noise. As he pulled the soup out to inspect and stir, he said, “They relied on each other for those sorts of things.”

The unsaid *not me* hung in the air, and Zack’s brow furrowed with concern and confusion. “What about when you would get boosts?”

“I’ve always handled them myself.”

“*Alone?*” Zack clarified, heart sinking with worry at the very prospect.

“I am accustomed to them,” Sephiroth elaborated blandly, evidently deciding the soup was warm enough, when he brought it over. He held the bowl out to Zack, along with the spoon he’d been stirring with.

Zack took the food somewhat numbly, imagining Sephiroth having to suffer through the same hellish exposure he just experienced. Zack couldn’t even *walk* back, let alone take care of himself. Even as he ate a spoonful of overly salty soup, he couldn’t believe Angeal wouldn’t at least *try*. “Didn’t they offer to help you?” Zack questioned, as Sephiroth moved his laptop and seated himself.

“Not explicitly,” Sephiroth said, waking the device from sleep mode to check it. “Genesis has never been the *nurturing* type. Angeal would often tell me to let him know if I needed assistance—I didn’t.”

“Why not? Mako boosts suck. Yours have gotta be even worse.”

“Because I’m also a horrible patient,” Sephiroth stated sardonically.

Zack swallowed down more soup, only to narrow his eyes at Sephiroth. “…what, like you’re stubborn? Don’t wanna take your meds?”

Sephiroth inhaled deeply for a moment, eyes still on the screen of his laptop. “For you, it’s a joke that you might reflexively hurt someone, should they touch you while you’re under duress,” he said, eventually. “For me…it isn’t.”

“…oh,” Zack uttered, far more understanding. Because, yes, getting reflexively punched by *Sephiroth* would likely break a bone. Or several. Still, Zack hated the thought of Sephiroth having to just struggle through an exposure by himself. “Well…that’s only if someone touches you, right?” Zack specified, smiling when Sephiroth gave him a curious look. “What if, next time you get a boost, I swing by and make *you* soup?”

“That’s…” Sephiroth began, only for his shoulders to slump, slightly. “…unnecessary,” he determined. “You don’t have to do that, Zack.”

The pause, though, just made Zack that much more convinced that he did. “I want to,” he insisted. “You help me out all the time. I wanna help *you* for a change. It’s not fair, otherwise.”

Sephiroth was quiet as he mulled it over.

“Could turn it into cooking lessons, too,” Zack joked, in the hopes that making it less about being a patient might make the offer more enticing. “Since I’d be bringing all the ingredients anyway, I could show you how to actually *make* the soup.”

As Zack hoped, Sephiroth’s interest was piqued. “You would?”

“Yeah, soup’s easy,” Zack informed him, vaguely and gently waving his hand. “Just gotta chop everything up and throw it in a pot, with some water. You can handle chopping—you know your way around blades.”

The observation brought a smirk back to Sephiroth’s lips. “I don’t think using Masamune to cut up vegetables is the most sanitary option.”

Zack grinned, about to snark back when Sephiroth’s laptop lit up with a message at the corner, drawing both their attention.

“…Lazard,” Sephiroth revealed, scanning the message’s contents. He shut his laptop down with a soft sigh. “I should get going.”

Groaning, Zack let his head flop back onto the couch. “He really wasn’t kidding about working us harder, huh,” he grumbled.

“He never does. Rest while you can,” Sephiroth told him, sympathy in his face, despite the teasing tone.

As he made ready to leave, Zack shifted quickly. “Wait—wait, hang on,” he demanded, wincing all the way as he put his soup on the coffee table, and stood himself up. Once upright, Zack held his arms out. “Can I hug you before you go?”

Sephiroth stared at him for a beat, before hesitantly, confusedly nodding.

Zack beamed, wrapping his arms tight around Sephiroth’s torso. “Thanks for coming,” he said, as Sephiroth stiltedly held Zack, in turn. “I really, really appreciate it. Like, you have *no* idea.”

“…it was no trouble,” Sephiroth assured him, still rigid where he stood.

Ordinarily, Zack would assume someone so stiff just didn’t like hugs, but he had an inkling that Sephiroth probably just wasn’t very used to them. So, he gave Sephiroth another squeeze of affection before

letting go. “Stay safe,” he said, grinning up at Sephiroth. “And let me know what kinda soups you like, for your lessons.”

“Very well,” Sephiroth chuckled warmly, and then gently, amicably patted Zack’s arm, once. “Take care.” With that, he maneuvered around the many boxes still littering the floor, and departed, closing the door softly behind him.

Zack shuffled back onto the couch, making himself comfortable with his soup, and turning on the television. Having Sephiroth come help him, he thought, was absolutely the right call. He was now all set for recovery, and his brain was awhirl with excitement, thinking of how he could teach Shinra’s most fearsome warrior how to, hopefully, not set off the kitchen smoke alarms.

Mixed Methodology

Chapter Summary

> Zack learns a bit more about what being a mentor entails, as well as a bit more about his own mentor.

Chapter Notes

> So I am technically out of buffer bc I hit a nasty period of writer's block lmao However I do have enough notes for the next chapter that I know it'll go up on time! I'm hoping to hunker down and get some more buffer written up in the next few weeks but if anything changes about that/the schedule I'll be sure to say something here and/or on my tumblr.

Zack slammed his sword into the group of Bee Saucers with a High Jump, finishing them off with a flourish, and then looked around for his shadowing Third. He cursed his luck all the while. Couldn't just call out the guy's name—he tried checking the register right before they left, forgetting that, *of course* the Third's name wouldn't be on it. It was Zack's mission, now. "…all clear," he noted instead, soon spotting the Third jogging out from behind some stacked storage containers.

"I don't know how you can navigate down here, Zack!" the Third said with awe, gesturing at the branching hallways around them. "The Plate Interior's so huge!"

"After enough missions in it, you get used to it," Zack told him, decidedly leaving out how he was just here, failing to catch a mad scientist, last month. "C'mon, let's go find that glitching weapon and retrieve the cargo."

"Yes, sir, Boss Man!"

Boss Man? Zack questioned, though he laughed lightly without addressing the nickname. The Third was almost *too* eager today, all energy, enraptured by every sweep of Zack's sword. Even now, just walking their way down the long, metal halls, Zack could feel the guy observing him. Noticed the Third adjusting his steps, until he was walking at exactly the same pace Zack did. Exactly the *way* Zack did.

It was…weird.

He was doubly preoccupied, both by his doubts that mere observation was enough for the Third to gain confidence, and by the work itself. While the Third seemed more upbeat today, he still wasn't demonstrating any increases in strength. Or any desire to fight, himself. What's more, other than the malfunctioning machines, they kept running into G Assailants.

How many more of these bastards hid down here? Zack wondered bitterly. *How many did Genesis…make?*

The Assailants weren't a threat, so much as a very annoying reminder that Genesis must still be out there somewhere, plotting. Zack would have to make sure Lazard knew. For now, Zack tried to focus on what he might say to the Third, to ensure the guy was learning *something*.

Before he could figure that out, though, he spotted their quarry—one of Shinra's Flying Machines, hovering all the way at the end of the hall.

The bright red dome covering its camera lens caught Zack's attention first. Ordinarily, that camera would identify monsters, and then the mech would kick in its offensive, activating its guns. Right now, the camera was identifying anyone and anything as a monster, and the machine revved up as soon as it set its sights on Zack and the Third. Three more Bee Saucers zoomed into view as well, their shared instructions sending them immediately in Zack's direction.

"Here we go!" Zack declared, ushering for the Third to move somewhere safe. Then, Zack rushed forward, mana already pooling into his new Thundaga—one of the perks of being assigned so many damn missions, lately. As the Bee Saucers glided toward him, Zack fired the massive bolts of lightning at the group, nailing all the machines at once.

The Bee Saucers collapsed, instantly overwhelmed, while the Flying Machine listed to the side, one its propellers too damaged to spin.

Easier than I thought, Zack noted, glad he hadn't used much mana until now. He shot another Thundaga at the Flying Machine, successfully frying its circuitry.

Crashing to the ground, the Flying Machine's beeping alarms slowed, until it finally shut down.

"That's that," Zack announced, turning to where the Third was hiding. "Should be all set to grab the cargo, now."

“That was *incredible,* Boss Man!” the Third exclaimed, running forward. He held up both of his fists in his excitement, reminding Zack of an eager kid. “You’re such an inspiration! I want to become a SOLDIER operative just like you!”

Zack stared, reassessing the strange and sudden energy, as he felt the instinctive urge to pat the guy on the head. Not exactly like a kid, though—more like patting an excitable dog—

…restless like a little puppy.

Oh no, Zack inwardly groaned. *Tell me he’s not*— “Hey, what’s with the nickname, by the way?” Zack asked gingerly, putting his sword back on its harness as casually as he could manage. “You’re talking pretty, uh…different, today, I noticed.”

“Oh. Too much?” the Third inquired, his eager attitude wiped away with concern. “It’s just—my Commander once told me that to be an effective SOLDIER operative, I had to act like one.” He slumped, then, disheartened by the realization he was doing something wrong. “Since you’re the best operative I know, I thought…”

Zack covered his grimace with his hand as he tried to stifle the flare of sheer, awkward mortification. He was going to have to message Sephiroth later—beg him for reassurance that Zack’s antics weren’t *this* weird. Clearing his throat, Zack directed a curious, and hopefully non-judgmental expression at the Third. “So…That’s why you’ve been calling me ‘Boss man?’”

“I heard you like giving nicknames to people,” the Third explained. “Kunsel said you call him Kuns?”

“I guess I do…do that, Zack relented, crossing his arms as he regarded the Third with bafflement. “You know that has nothing to do with being a good operative, though, right? And that I’m not your boss? I’m just your senior.”

“Well…yes,” the Third admitted, hanging his head. “I just hoped that, if I got into the right mindset, maybe I’d improve more. But—!” He perked up again, standing tall and surprisingly confident. “I do think it’s been helping! I think I could take on the next mission by myself!”

“That’s great!” Zack cheered with relief, albeit still a little worried the guy hadn’t actually learned anything.

“I would really love just *one* more demonstration, though,” the Third

said, drawing his hands together pleadingly. “It’s just so amazing to watch you in action, Zack!”

There was no way this guy learned anything, Zack determined. Zack understood how watching a stronger senior was impressive, but to ask Zack to do *another* whole mission? While Zack was already swamped? Sure, these lower ranking missions were a lot easier than most of Zack’s current caseload, but he would be…How did Sephiroth once put it? ‘Remiss in his duties,’ if he didn’t ensure this Third could handle things by himself. Zack was happy to back him up, but the guy really needed to learn how to fight *without* Zack doing it for him.

“…tell you what,” Zack decided, gesturing at the Third. “How about, if you can explain some of the techniques I used during the fights today, *then* I’ll do your next mission. The whole thing. If you can’t, I’ll still help you out, but even if I take it on the register, *you* have to do the fighting.”

Immediately, as Zack feared, the Third’s confidence deflated. “Uh…I think…I could do that.”

Zack was positive he absolutely could not. “Okay. Can you tell me why I used my High Jump materia against those Bee Saucers earlier?”

The Third hesitated, looking awkwardly around the many storage containers and bits and bobs littered about the hall as he searched for an answer. “Because it’s strong and…looks impressive?” he guessed.

“*Bzzt.* Nope,” Zack answered, shaking his head. “The leaping force Jump and High Jump give you lets you close the distance between you, and your opponent, really fast. *And* it hits multiple targets,” Zack explained. “It’s also really great if you need to dodge something in a pinch. Like, think of how a Sahagin will use it to get the drop on you —” he continued, all set to get into all the details he loved about his new materia, just to catch the confused, pursed frown of the Third. Before he really started rambling, Zack switched gears. “…maybe that was too much at once. How about this: why did I use Thundaga on these last machines?”

Leaning to look past Zack, and study the smoking remains, the Third’s dubious frown lingered.

Zack waited, stress increasing the longer the Third didn’t answer. He had to know this one, right? It was easy. Basic as you could get. He was pretty sure there was a related question on the entrance exam, under the materia usage section.

“Because it’s more powerful than Thundara…?” the Third answered with an uncertain wince.

“Sure, but why *Thundaga,* and not…I dunno, Firaga?” Zack pressed.

“I…I’m not sure,” the Third finally said, hanging his head again. “I’m sorry…I’ve failed you…”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it!” Zack cautioned, panicked. “It’s not a big deal, it’s just—” He stopped, biting his lips together on the last word. Basics. *Basic* knowledge. Something he guy should have known before he got accepted into the program, and one he would be absolutely expected to know by the time he made Second—

Suddenly, the stress and insistence Sephiroth had about Zack’s *own* bad habits made so much sense, Zack wanted to scream with embarrassment.

Zack took a deep, *deep* breath, letting it out in one big sigh. He was going to have his work cut out for him, but it was fine. If Sephiroth could teach Zack to tone down his tendency to show off, he could definitely teach this Third about materia match ups. “Okay,” Zack said, clapping his hands together. He waved for the Third to follow him. “Let’s break this down while we get that cargo, yeah? So, lightning magic works *really* well on machines…”

With all the missions Zack and Sephiroth had, it was tough to find any sort of downtime to hang out. Zack was scowling at his schedule for weeks. He knew Lazard probably wasn’t *trying* to drive them apart on purpose, but as good as Zack was at his job, he felt too lonely doing mission after mission on his own. Occasional hellos in HQ from Cissnei and Tseng weren’t enough to fill Zack’s friend time quota.

So, on a whim, he sent Sephiroth an official meeting request through the Company system. The meeting was allegedly for Supernova assistance, at the very end of business hours. Zack had nothing new to share—he just figured that looked better on the calendar than ‘hang out, because Zack will go crazy from overwork and loneliness otherwise.’

When the appointed day came, Zack entered the Briefing Room to find Sephiroth had missed the unsaid hanging out memo. He stood at the edge of the conference table with a thick, hard-backed book in hand. The front cover was decorated with images of space, and planets.

Zack took one look at the word ‘Astrophysics’ in the emblazoned title and accused, “We don’t see each other for weeks, and you ambush me with *math?*”

Sephiroth regarded him with confusion. “You *are* the one who requested assistance with Supernova.”

“I didn’t think you’d break out the textbooks!”

“You didn’t specify. I thought this was as good a time as any to look into the equations.”

While it wasn’t what Zack had in mind, he was finally getting some training time out of it. Sephiroth was right, too—they hadn’t tried this route before. It *might* help Zack figure out how to get the status effects and the full, fractional damage to work together.

Sighing dramatically, Zack leaned his sword against the back wall. Then he trudged to the nearest chair, flopping into it and casting a suspicious squint at the book. “…*Fine*,” he relented. “Just keep in mind I’ve forgotten like, half my times tables.”

Sephiroth smiled at him, bemused. “You won’t have to deal with those just yet,” he promised, hitting a few keys on the desk’s computer. On the far wall, the projector blinked to life, as Sephiroth pulled up a complex-looking equation, with at least four symbols Zack didn’t recognize.

There wasn’t a single number on the screen.

“It’s *letter* math?!” Zack groaned in dismay.

“Astrophysics. It should look familiar,” Sephiroth told him. “When casting Supernova, it’s one of the many equations involved with the spell.”

Grimacing doubtfully at the W and R and inexplicably *four* Us on the wall, Zack tried in vain to recall the symbols. He never got to this level of math back in Gongaga. “Usually the spell just looks like lots of planets exploding,” Zack described. Though, there could be letters rushing by that he simply missed—spells were weird like that, sometimes conjuring runes, or even words into the space around them.

“Do you know how a supernova occurs?”

Zack shook his head. “Big space explosion with star stuff is about as much info as I’ve got.”

“I suppose it could be summarized as such,” Sephiroth decided with a chuckle. “The spell summons a comet that collides with the sun, which acts as the progenitor. The equations here,” Sephiroth laid the textbook out in front of Zack, pointing to the ones he was discussing, “calculate the sun and other planets’ potential attractive forces. The next,” he continued, flipping a few pages and pointing at another equation, “calculates our Planet’s.”

Staring blankly at the page, and the many unfamiliar space terms in the paragraphs explaining the math, Zack counted himself lucky he could be as honest with his mentor as that Third was with him. Zack looked up at Sephiroth in abject despair. “I am already *so* lost.”

“…let’s begin with the basics,” Sephiroth sighed.

Half an hour later, Zack’s brain felt fuzzy. He was paying attention. He was. He just couldn’t make heads or tails of some of the concepts Sephiroth was talking about, so his brain decided it was time to take a vacation and focus on literally anything else. As Sephiroth, yet again, checked something on the computer in his attempt to simplify some of the explanations, Zack squinted at the initial equations.

Sephiroth was right—it did *look* familiar, but when Zack checked it against the one in the textbook, he only grew more confused.

“Wait, those are the ones Supernova, the spell uses, right?” Zack asked, pointing at the equations on the wall.

“Yes.”

“How come this one in the book has the symbols upside-down?”

The question gave Sephiroth pause, and he turned to shoot the book a look of bafflement. “Excuse me?”

“These,” Zack noted, holding the book up to show Sephiroth.

Sephiroth frowned at the book. Then turned said frown at the display. Then, once more, at the book. “Why does my limit break use gamma instead of lambda…?” he questioned quietly. “Wait a moment,” he instructed, typing what Zack could only assume were search terms into the computer.

Zack put the book back on the table, watching curiously as Sephiroth researched.

"…this may not work, after all," Sephiroth determined, leaning back and scowling at the screen.

"Why not?"

"Because, apparently, the math in my limit break is incorrect," Sephiroth scoffed. He directed a tired, but somewhat still amused expression at Zack. "Though, the sun wouldn't be able to go supernova, regardless—it's too small a star."

"So, the answer is, it works because…magic?" Zack suggested in a fit of exhausted giggles.

Sephiroth merely drew his hand to the bridge of his nose, sighing heavily. "So it would seem, as unscientific as it sounds."

"Glad to hear my limit break's not the only totally illogical one."

"There likely is some sort of explanation," Sephiroth argued, balancing his tilted head on the tips of his fingers. "Though, as we already know, there's not much research on limit breaks. I've checked."

"Do we know why that is?" Zack asked, perking up a bit now that it was clear he would never have to deal with all this math again. "Woulda thought someone must've studied them at some point, considering everyone has them."

"Too varied, I would imagine," Sephiroth said. "With everyone having different limit breaks, and perhaps even different limit *systems*, it would be too difficult to design a control group."

"I wonder if limit systems overlap, though," Zack thought aloud, stretching in his seat. He drew his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling as he brainstormed. "I mean, most people's breaks build up when they take damage, right? So, if that's *normal*…"

"…you think there may be others with a DMW?" Sephiroth concluded, eyeing Zack curiously.

Zack shrugged, keeping his shoulders high for emphasis. "I dunno. Feels like there's gotta be, right? It'd be weird if I was the only one who was like this."

Sephiroth drew his hand to his chin as he thought. His expression, however, struck Zack as odd. His frown was strangely uneasy as his his eyes roamed over the equations again.

Meanwhile, Zack was bored. He could feel the boredom clawing at every single one of his synapses, knowing that if they just sat here *wondering* for much longer, he would go insane. Hopping to his feet, Zack started off a series of squats to stave off the agony of inaction. "There's gotta be *something,*" he complained as he moved, speaking between dips. "What's something—I dunno—that's just a *you* thing?"

Smoothly, Sephiroth relaxed, leaning back in his chair to watch Zack. He had gone a little stone-faced again, to Zack's surprise. "A wide variety of things," Sephiroth muttered idly, giving Zack the impression he wasn't remotely convinced any of them would help.

"Right, Mr. Poster Boy, and all," Zack acknowledged. Sephiroth was in a special position to begin with—practically everything that led up to his stardom was a Sephiroth-specific *thing*. Still, Zack figured it couldn't hurt to work some of that path into his own training.

Supernova might manifest correctly if they were under more similar circumstances.

Zack eased out of one last squat, asking, "Can you show me how they trained you?"

"…I don't see how that would affect anything," Sephiroth stated stiltedly.

"Kinda grasping at straws here, I know," Zack admitted, rubbing the back of his head, "but there's still a chance it could!" Then, with a dirty look at the astrophysics book, he added, "Plus, if I don't work off some steam, I think I might cast Supernova on the math, next."

Sephiroth shut his eyes with another sigh. "Well, we can't have that," he said, moving to stand. "To the VR Room, then."

Sephiroth pit Zack against a Dual Horn, with a single instruction: Take down the enemy with one blow.

Despite the lack of any sort of demo, Zack managed it. One, super-powered slam of his sword against the Dual Horn's massive noggin, and it was down. Delighted and proud, he spun back around to Sephiroth, expecting praise.

Yet, Sephiroth wasn't even looking at him, already fiddling with the controls of the module via his PHS. "That one was too weak," Sephiroth stated. "Now, again."

A bit miffed when the VR Dual Horn reformed in front of him, Zack grimaced as deeply as the monster did. He readied his sword regardless. When the beast lumbered forward on its thick, stumpy legs, Zack ran to meet it. Once more, he gathered as much momentum as he could, swinging his sword down on the fiend's forehead.

The blade didn't even cut the hide, and Zack was soon launched off his feet by a bucking headbutt.

Immediately, Sephiroth reset the module, meaning Zack's last attack didn't count. "Again," Sephiroth instructed.

Zack groaned in annoyance, pushing himself to his feet. It was fine. If Sephiroth could do this kind of thing when he was younger, so could Zack. At least, in theory. So, Zack ran at the fiend again.

Only to fail, and get knocked down, again.

"Rushing at it every time and expecting a different result is pointless," Sephiroth told him, an edge of irritation in his own voice.

"You said *one blow*," Zack argued as he sat back up. Glowering at Sephiroth, he asked, "What, I don't get any hints?"

"You're a First," Sephiroth reminded him, expression flat and unimpressed. "At your level, it's expected that you can figure it out yourself. Can't you?"

Standing, Zack met Sephiroth's gaze with a confused grimace. "… sure," he decided, turning to face the fiend again. He could definitely figure it out. Sephiroth was right, after all—Zack *was* a First. Still, seeing the Dual Horn snarling through its small, sharp teeth, Zack felt oddly uneasy. *Sword didn't work,* he thought*, so, maybe magic*. Letting loose with a Thundaga, Zack's heart leapt with hope as the beast staggered.

Only, the Dual Horn simply shook its giant head from side to side, before reorienting on Zack again.

The fiend dissipated into blue cubes, rearranging itself as Sephiroth reset it, yet again. This time, Sephiroth said nothing, merely crossing his arms and eyeing the Dual Horn with a disdainful stare of his own.

He didn't even acknowledge Zack.

So, no help figuring out what was quickly becoming a very annoying puzzle, Zack determined. He wracked his brain for what he knew about Dual Horns—whether there were any elements it was weak against. Something to exploit. But as the beast prepared to skewer him with its horns, Zack couldn't think of a damn thing.

Frustrated, he threw his all into a High Jump, hoping maybe the angle, or the right materia would do the trick—

His sword glanced off again, and Zack was hurled from the beast's back before the module was reset.

"Ugh, seriously?!" Zack snapped at Sephiroth.

"You were the one who wanted action," Sephiroth reminded him coolly.

Zack grumbled to himself. Normally, yeah, fighting fiends was pretty fun to him—figuring out ways to outsmart or overpower them, especially. But a Dual Horn? Fighting a Dual Horn felt like fighting a wall, even when he *was* allowed more than one shot.

As the fiend lumbered in his direction, Zack resigned himself to testing every single materia he had on him—after all, Sephiroth wouldn't put him up to this with no solution…right?

This time, when the Dual Horn sent Zack flying and crashing onto his back, Zack didn't bother getting up. He could hear the module dissipating, and still didn't budge, scowling at the ceiling. He'd lost count of how many times he'd screwed up, and it was getting *really* old watching Sephiroth unamusedly reset everything.

"Get up," Sephiroth demanded.

"How long do I have to keep doing this?"

"Until you do it right. Now, up."

"No," Zack retorted, waving his hand in the air as he complained, "This is *impossible*. What level did you even set this shit at?"

"Get *up*, SOLDIER," Sephiroth snarled, with such force Zack did actually sit up straight, in surprise. "This module is meant to test your limits. Are you telling me you can't even handle this much?"

Zack's lips parted, shocked and offended all at once. Sephiroth *knew* Zack was more capable than this—What kind of question was that? "Of course I can *handle* it, I just—"

"Then get up, and stop wasting time."

While Zack did stand up, it was slowly, wondering what the hell he was doing so wrong. Obviously he was doing the module wrong; that much was obvious. But for it to piss off Sephiroth? Zack shrank under the impatient glare of his mentor, baffled and angry all at once. And tired.

And hungry, now that he thought about it.

Sephiroth might be, too, Zack reasoned. "Can we take a break?" he suggested. "I just realized I'm starving, and you—"

"You wanted to train as I did, correct?" Sephiroth interjected sharply.

"Uh…yeah, but—"

"Then you'll continue the test," Sephiroth stated, activating the module once more. "Again."

Zack's heart dropped in his chest as the Dual Horn's overbearing scowl filled his vision again. "*What?!*" he asked, trying and failing to get around the beast and question Sephiroth directly.

"You heard me," Sephiroth snapped over the snarling of the fiend, "*Again.*"

Smacking his sword irritably against the Dual Horn, prompting Sephiroth to reset it, Zack gestured angrily with his weapon. "Are you saying I just have to keep doing this without *food?!*"

"Think of it as imitating more realistic mission parameters," Sephiroth said, his voice flat. Almost robotic, like he was reciting something. "You won't always have the luxury of taking a break for a meal."

Zack knew that. Of course he knew that. He'd been in the field plenty of times before. "Isn't that usually when you *retreat* and take care of yourself?" Zack questioned, moving quickly around the reforming Dual Horn before it could block him off from Sephiroth again. "Even if it's just to scarf down a nutrient pack?!"

"Only when absolutely necessary," Sephiroth explained, crossing his

arms over his chest with irritation as Zack all but ignored the fiend in the VR field. “You’ll never reach your true potential fretting over ridiculous things like that. Push through your limits, and finish the module.”

When the Dual Horn growled, Zack hurled a quick blast of Thundaga at it, turning right back to Sephiroth with a defiant glower.

Sephiroth shut his eyes briefly, pausing to pinch the bridge of his nose. His shoulders sagged, somewhat, and for a moment, Zack thought that would be the end of it. Even Sephiroth didn’t seem to want to be doing this.

Yet, Sephiroth took out his PHS, and reset the module.

“Come *on!”* Zack bemoaned. “I’ve leveled up twice already, and I still can’t knock it out—Let’s just stop!”

“You *will* complete this module.”

“But I—”

“Don’t talk back to me,” Sephiroth snapped. “This test will only end when the Dual Horn is defeated, or you are knocked unconscious.”

“But that’s—!” Zack began, only to bite down his protests when Sephiroth shot him another stern scowl. Still, Zack couldn’t bring himself to do more than ensure he was out of the Dual Horn’s way—it moved slow enough that he could still keep an eye on Sephiroth. Could still take time to try and puzzle out why the hell Sephiroth was acting so *weird.* Sephiroth never acted like this while training him—

And then, Zack remembered.

Of course Sephiroth didn’t train him like this—This was what Zack had explicitly asked for. This was how *Sephiroth* was trained.

The anger, the zero sympathy, the demands—all of that was probably straight from Sephiroth’s memories. Could even be quotes, for all Zack knew. All directed at Sephiroth.

As Zack circled the Dual Horn, sword out, he could only imagine Sephiroth trying to handle the same module. And how old was Sephiroth, back then? Zack’s age? Younger? He had to have been younger, given how long Sephiroth’s career was—

The Dual Horn charged, and Zack blasted it with magic in a panic, just for it to dissolve. And reform. An endless, impossible battle, all when Sephiroth was still green. Back when even the VR system was new. Perpetually pushed to his limits, and well beyond—the same modules with no assistance, no guidance, no breaks, over, and over, and *over*.

Until you do it right.

Zack lowered his sword, his face falling along with it as he looked at Sephiroth in horrified realization. “What the hell did they put you through?”

The question broke whatever tension Sephiroth had wrapped around himself, and he visibly flinched, only to quickly turn his face. “…that’s enough for today,” Sephiroth muttered, moving to end the module, at last.

“Wait,” Zack stopped him, desperate to somehow fix the situation—a task perhaps even more impossible than the module, yet Zack was no less determined to try. “I…Y’know what, forget teaching me the way they taught you,” he decided, growing more confident when Sephiroth confusedly met his gaze again. “How would *you* teach me how to do this?”

It took Sephiroth several moments, thinking to himself, staring at the empty field with a frown. Manufactured wind flicked against his hair, and Sephiroth shut his eyes against it, remaining quiet. Just when Zack thought Sephiroth might give up on the exercise entirely, he asked, “What have you noticed, during these fights?”

“…that my sword doesn’t do shit?”

“And, why is that?”

“Because…I’m not…doing it right?” Zack guessed, though when Sephiroth looked at him, he was even less certain. The only thing he was certain about was the flash of sorrowful irritation that flickered over Sephiroth’s face.

“No,” Sephiroth refuted, resetting the module but pausing it, once the fiend had fully formed. He gestured to it, asking, “What have you noticed about the Dual Horn, specifically?”

Judging by that statement, Sephiroth did think Zack was capable. The issue was something else. Zack grimaced at the Dual Horn. Magic worked, but not well enough to kill the thing in one shot. Swinging his

sword at it felt about as effective as trying to slice rocks. At this level, almost nothing could get through, like fighting someone decked out in solid steel.

“Natural armor,” Zack concluded.

Sephiroth nodded. “And, how do you fight opponents wearing armor, with a sword?”

“Go for the joints. Cracks. Weak spots,” Zack rattled off, pacing in front of the fiend in frustration. “But this thing doesn’t *have* those! That stupid thick skin covers all its joints!”

“Perhaps,” Sephiroth agreed, but he smirked in a pleased way, inclining his head. “However, skin doesn’t cover *everything*.”

Zack took another look at the Dual Horn, wondering how something so obvious was supposed to be a clue. Of course skin didn’t cover everything. The real fiend needed to eat, and breathe, and see—

The answer hit Zack harder than any of the Dual Horn's tackles.

He felt like an idiot, staring down the beast. He could just stab right through its eyes. They weren’t a big target, by any means, but at that point it was simply a matter of *precision* rather than raw power. Which, when faced with an enemy as clunky as a Dual Horn, was a tactic crazy enough it might just work. Especially with the reflexes of a SOLDIER First.

Goal set, Zack raised his sword again. “…can I try again?” he asked, feeling much more confident when Sephiroth calmly nodded, and began the module.

The Dual Horn did take a swing at Zack, but even as tired and hungry as he was, Zack’s enhancements allowed him to outpace it. After the monster heaved its horns in Zack’s direction, only to miss, there was a brief second where it staggered—just the opening Zack needed to leap for his target. In a blink, his sword stabbed right through the Dual Horn’s eye, and Zack shoved it in up to the hilt.

By the time Zack withdrew the blade, the fiend was already spasming, and it collapsed to the floor—dead before it hit the ground.

Zack stared at it, his brain slow to realize he really just achieved what he thought was impossible. When the beast’s body dissipated, *not* reforming into yet another challenge, Zack beamed at Sephiroth. “I

did it!" he shouted triumphantly, raising his fist and weapon with pride when he spotted the smile on Sephiroth's face.

The smile didn't last long, though. "That one was also too weak," Sephiroth observed seriously. "The next will have a higher difficulty, and added enhancements."

"Wh—?!" Zack started to shout in protest, only to stop when Sephiroth's expression broke back into a sly smirk.

"…is what I would say, if I were Hojo," Sephiroth finished, tapping the controls on his PHS and dismissing the VR environment entirely. He relaxed, looking openly more tired than before, but his voice was warm, as he elaborated, "Since I'm not, you're dismissed." He indicated the exit with a quick tilt of his head. "Go get some dinner."

Slumping, Zack let out a heavy sigh of relief. Conflict, resolved. *Finally*. Though, as he straightened and saw Sephiroth already heading to the computers—right back to work, without a break, himself—Zack's gut twisted. He trailed after Sephiroth, watching as the older First plainly settled in to review the combat data.

With most other people, Zack might assume it was a sign they wanted to be left alone, but…

Fighting through modules, without a break. Going over data, without a break. It seemed going about the day without any breaks was simply the *norm*, for Sephiroth. Like the standard set when he was first training for SOLDIER had, ultimately, carried over into everything else.

Zack fidgeted with his fingers, frowning pensively at Sephiroth's back. "They, uh…" he fumbled, not sure he truly wanted the answer to the question springing to his mind. "…you don't get tested like that *now*, do you?"

"I have too many duties with my current position for regularly scheduled testing," Sephiroth answered nonchalantly, not turning around. "…but, on occasion, yes. Hojo typically has me test modules meant to expand SOLDIER's limits, as a whole."

The answer was, as Zack worried, exactly what he *didn't* want to hear.

Sephiroth had an image to maintain, of course. Shinra's image, of the perfect poster boy. Behind that image was all this testing, insane challenges meant to put some credence to Shinra's ever-shifting goal

post. Most anyone would crack under that sort of pressure.

And yet, here was Sephiroth, managing to get through all that, with enough compassion intact to *not* treat Zack the same way—not as Zack's mentor, at any rate. Not unless asked.

Zack continued to frown, wishing he could lighten the load somehow. It wasn't fair for Sephiroth to have to deal with all that alone, but Zack didn't know how to stop things like PR's incessant need for perfection. He might not be able to help with that.

He could, however, offer solutions for more minor issues. "Hey," Zack prompted, stepping up to Sephiroth's side to catch his eye. "Let's both get some food. And maybe some dessert after, to celebrate!"

Sephiroth regarded him with confusion. "Celebrate?"

"That I beat the Dual Horn!"

"I'd have thought you would want to celebrate with your friends."

Anyone else, Zack would've thought the statement was a firm line drawn as to what their relationship was. But the way Sephiroth said it, with the honestly baffled expression, brought Zack to an altogether different conclusion. *"You're* one of my friends," Zack clarified slowly, pain pricking his chest when Sephiroth looked *surprised* by that information. Not in a way that gave the impression he didn't like Zack—far from it. Sephiroth didn't seem to consider *himself* Zack's friend. "Did you not think we were friends?" Zack asked, in rapidly increasing concern.

Sephiroth's eyes darted away. "I…didn't want to assume," he admitted quietly.

So, out of politeness, he was just ignoring basically everything Zack thought *more* than qualified them as friends. "But—You—You're part of my *pack,* man!" Zack spluttered incredulously, waving his hands in distress. "Of *course* you're—! Okay, y'know what? Now we're *definitely* getting food to celebrate," he decided. Then, walking determinedly to the door, he ordered, "C'mon, Seph!"

"…Seph?" Sephiroth echoed in amusement, hesitantly, but eventually following.

"Someone informed me recently that I tend to give my friends nicknames," Zack explained, hands on his hips as he impatiently

waited for Sephiroth to catch up. “So, I figure, since you’re my friend, you’re *way* overdue for a nickname.” He grinned at Sephiroth, suddenly feeling like he achieved a lot more than beating a Dual Horn in one blow, when Sephiroth smiled warmly back at him. “That work for you? Or should I think of something else?”

“It’s fine,” Sephiroth assured him, heading out into the hallway with Zack, “It’s just…different.”

“I can work with different,” Zack declared, taking the lead.

“Yes,” Sephiroth chuckled, falling into step with him, “I suppose you’ve proven that already.”

Fostering Friendships

Chapter Summary

> Zack gets some long-needed time with friends - First, finally getting to some soup lessons with Sephiroth, and then making good on his promise for one date, with Aerith.

Chapter Notes

> Admittedly I did not get as much buffer done as I'd hoped, but I'm still confident I can get the next chapter done on time, so! No worries there. Also, I didn't go into this intending for the soup to be pumpkin soup, initially, but I think I was vague enough with the ingredients that it could be if you squint LMAO

Sharing a celebratory meal at the Mess brought Zack to another unsettling realization. Namely, that Angeal's comment about Sephiroth looking *haggard* was even more applicable now than it had been several months ago. Seeing Sephiroth eat, astonishingly, less food than Zack was worrying. Bringing it up didn't amount to much, either—with Sephiroth merely claiming he never had much of an appetite in the first place.

It could be a simple fact of his metabolism, but now that Zack knew more about Sephiroth's work habits, he wondered.

The matter irked him for several more weeks—it, technically, wasn't his business. Sort of awkward to mention Sephiroth seemed a little too thin, as well. Zack fought through mission after mission almost on auto-pilot, unsure of how he could take some of the stress off of Sephiroth's plate, when his own was so overloaded.

Until, one day, Zack realized he didn't have to take something *off*—he could more literally fill Sephiroth's plate with better food, instead.

So, the next time Zack scheduled a hangout, he did so with the intention of making good on his promise to give Sephiroth some cooking lessons. He also made sure Sephiroth was aware of the actual goal of the 'training request,' as well—Zack didn't think he could stomach more astrophysics.

At his apartment, Zack checked all the ingredients he'd laid out on the counter, crossing each one off of the recipe they decided on. The stock

was accounted for, as was all the veggies. He grabbed the necessary spices from his spice rack, just to have it all prepared for Sephiroth, once he arrived. Though, Zack noticed, checking the time, Sephiroth was running uncharacteristically late.

As if summoned by the very thought, there was a knock at the door.

“It’s open!” Zack called, grinning at Sephiroth as the man entered. “You don’t have to knock,” Zack told him, laughing lightly. “You already know the code.”

“Noted,” Sephiroth replied, his tone oddly tight as he removed his boots.

“You’re off after this, right?” Zack questioned, taking in the tired slump of Sephiroth’s shoulders with a smidge of concern. Must have been a long day. At Sephiroth’s affirmative grunt, Zack offered, “Do you want a shirt to change into? Cooking in your uniform’s probably not the best idea—Unless you wanna borrow an apron.”

Sephiroth paused, taking several moments to process before he managed to remove his other boot. “…if you have a shirt that will fit, I would prefer that,” he conceded.

Zack went to fetch one. His regular SOLDIER turtlenecks should be enough—they were plenty stretchy. By the time he found a clean shirt and returned to the main living area, Sephiroth’s pauldrons were off, and he was stashing his coat in the closet. “Here ya go,” Zack said, coming over to Sephiroth to hand him the shirt.

This close, Zack immediately spotted the deep, dark circles present under Sephiroth’s eyes. His movements were slower, too—methodical, as he removed the belts of his uniform. Like he had to think extra hard about how to take all the equipment off.

“You look beat,” Zack observed. “Insomnia again?”

The only reply was dispassionate hum, before Sephiroth let the heavy belts fall to the floor. He took Zack’s shirt, shrugging it on with relative ease, adding, “That, and research in the Data Room.”

“Again? Why?”

“The more I read about the history of the Science Department, and Project G, the more I run across missing files,” Sephiroth informed Zack, frowning in annoyance at his own hair as he tugged it through

the rest of the way, and straightened it. “There are references to other books and papers that I haven’t been able to locate, on base.”

“Sounds like one hell of a rabbit hole,” Zack noted sympathetically, though privately still wondered why Sephiroth was insisting on continuing his research. They knew enough horrors about Project G, didn’t they? Zack was pretty sure learning anything more would just be…upsetting. “Do you think something in those other books might help?”

“I don’t know,” Sephiroth confessed softly, slowly, exhaustedly shaking his head.

Zack pursed his lips as he thought. “…well, maybe getting some good food in you will make it easier,” he suggested, cheerfully beaming up at Sephiroth.

Despite his exhaustion, Sephiroth regarded him with amusement, playfully dubious as he said, “I don’t think food will solve this particular conundrum.”

“I said *good* food,” Zack protested, wagging a finger at Sephiroth for emphasis. “Good food helps with everything.” With that, and a soft chuckle from Sephiroth, Zack waved for him to follow into the kitchen. “C’mon, I’ve got everything set up.”

Sephiroth hesitated upon seeing the spread, looking somewhat intimidated by the number of ingredients. “You said this was a simple recipe.”

“It is,” Zack assured him, laughing, “Most of the work is just chopping stuff up.” Then, indicating the carrots, instructed, “Go ahead and start cleaning the veggies, will ya?”

Once everything was washed, their real work began in earnest. Under Zack’s tutelage, Sephiroth handled the peeler like a champ, making quick work of the carrots while Zack bravely faced off against the onion. By the time he finished demonstrating how to dice it, Sephiroth had already handed him a paper towel to dab at his watering eyes. Sephiroth also retreated to a safe, onion-free zone of the kitchen.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Sephiroth asked, watching bemusedly as Zack covered both his leaking eyes with the paper towel at once.

“I’m fine, I swear,” Zack insisted, even if he was still squinting through his tears to meet Sephiroth’s gaze. “It’s just how onions are!

And SOLDIER senses make it even worse—"

"Perhaps we shouldn't use it, then?"

"*Blasphemy,*" Zack stated very seriously, mean-mugging Sephiroth for a half-second, only to crack himself up again. "I mean, technically we could. It'll taste a lot better with it, though, you'll see."

Soon enough, the veggies were sizzling in the pot, with Sephiroth assigned to stir until they browned. He was incredibly focused on his task, eyes never leaving the pot for a second. Sephiroth approached his watch like he was on guard duty during a mission.

It reminded Zack of his own cooking lessons from his dad—of being little, peering into the pot with the help of his mom. Worrying about paying enough attention, while his dad rattled on about different techniques, and joked that Zack's intense gaze alone was gonna cook the food faster than the stove. Now, as the teacher, Zack found he also couldn't help but tease, "It's not gonna combust or anything. Relax—it'll be a few minutes, and it won't burn with you stirring so often."

"Hm," was all Sephiroth said, pensive and doubtful.

"I promise the veggies won't go supernova on you," Zack swore. Then, with a laugh, he corrected himself, "Sorry, I mean won't go *soup*-ernova."

Sephiroth's eyes flicked Zack's way in a still focused, but very much disdainful expression.

"Hey, I thought that was good!" Zack argued, searching the counter for more opportunities for puns. He found the peeler, and he held it up, gesturing to it with a mischievous grin. "I think my puns are pretty a-*peeling*."

"Awful," Sephiroth countered, despite the huff of laughter it coaxed out of him.

"I'll have you know I'm a *seasoned* comedian," Zack continued, holding out spices for Sephiroth to take. "Here, add this."

"Are the puns also necessary?" Sephiroth questioned snarkily, sprinkling the spices into the mix.

"Yes," Zack stated firmly, and then went to procure the measuring cup full of broth that he'd set aside. "Here, once that smells good, put this

in," he instructed. As Sephiroth readied it, Zack leaned on the counter, head full of fond childhood memories of his dad cracking jokes along with the peppercorns. "My Pops would tell you puns are the most important part of the process."

Sephiroth scoffed good-naturedly as he poured in the broth, the steam hissing loudly for a moment, before the pot filled up. "I see," he said, seeming more comfortable now as he methodically stirred the soup.

"He makes the best food. And the best jokes," Zack elaborated, reminiscing, "I remember this one time, my buddy Sotetsu and I caught these nasty colds after we fell in the river—Pops had like, ten puns for every meal he gave us." Zack shot Sephiroth a grin. "We've always joked that we're not sure what cured us faster—the food, or the laughs."

"That does explain your own sense of humor," Sephiroth pointed out, but as he thought on the story, he soon grew concerned. "…how did you fall into a river?"

"Oh, I dunno," Zack shrugged hardly remembering that part. After all, it hadn't been the first, or last, time. "I think we were just wrestling or something. Or it was part of a dare? Y'know, kid stuff."

"Ah."

"What about you?" Zack inquired, setting a timer for the soup on his PHS, and then placing it on the counter. "What kind of dumb stuff did you get up to as a kid?"

The stirring halted for a moment, as Sephiroth hesitated. "I'm not sure I did anything that would qualify as such."

"Come *on,*" Zack insisted, dragging out the words. "I'm sure there was something. Or, maybe stuff other kids dragged you into? I used to bring our local bookworms into the jungle for adventures—Anyone do that with you?"

"There weren't other children," Sephiroth stated softly.

"Huh?"

"I was raised inside Shinra," Sephiroth clarified, eyes firmly on the pot. "I didn't have much interaction with others until after I became a First."

Zack's train of thought ground to a halt, understanding the words individually, but not in that order. "Wait, *after* you became a First?" he repeated, struggling. "What were you doing before that?"

"Training, and testing," Sephiroth recalled dispassionately. "I was taught quite a bit about science, mathematics, and history, though my instructors placed more emphasis on the use of materia, and the like." After a few more thoughtful stirs, a wistful smile graced his lips. "I did hide the books I enjoyed the most in my room, so I wouldn't have to return them—if that qualifies as 'kid stuff,'" he revealed, "Though, I'm not sure where they ended up once I was moved to new quarters."

Zack stared at Sephiroth, aghast. Sephiroth said it all so blandly, as if talking about a dull meeting with Lazard, rather than what would have been Zack's personal hell. A childhood with *only* schooling, from the sound of it. No shenanigans with other students. No friends. No adventures. Just work.

It sounded *miserable*.

But, Sephiroth eventually joined SOLDIER. Surely things had to improve, then. There had to be stories, especially from when he first joined—and why, after growing up in that environment, Sephiroth picked SOLDIER, of all jobs.

"When did you decide to join SOLDIER?" Zack asked, trying to remember what he knew of Sephiroth's career—it felt as though he'd always been a First.

Sephiroth scoffed. "I didn't," he answered. "I was headed for SOLDIER longer than I can remember. My caretakers made that decision."

"Shinra…what, *assigned* you to SOLDIER? As a kid?" Zack questioned, the whole notion horrifyingly incomprehensible.

"I suppose you could put it that way," Sephiroth acknowledged, briefly checking Zack's PHS for the time.

"…and, the heroics?" Zack pressed, thinking of all the newspapers he read as a kid, detailing Sephiroth's accomplishments. Zack's inspiration for joining the program, himself. Heroics that, according to Sephiroth, were constantly fluffed up by PR.

Anxiety held Zack's heart in a vice, as he worried he could already guess the full picture with the pieces Sephiroth provided.

“All published well before my first field mission, as per PR’s strategy,” Sephiroth said, finally looking mildly annoyed at that particular memory.

“What the *hell?!*” Zack exclaimed, standing upright from the counter as he regarded Sephiroth with horrified concern. “That’s—Did you even *want* to be a hero?!”

Faltering, Sephiroth glanced once more at the timer, eyes soon back on the pot as if avoiding Zack’s. Quietly, and forlornly, he answered, “…no.”

“That’s messed up,” Zack declared, irate. “They just—Did they plan your whole damn life out? What about what *you* wanted?!”

At that, Sephiroth met Zack’s gaze with a strangely surprised expression. “It wasn’t important.”

“Of course it’s important!” Zack argued. “It’s *your* life!”

The timer beeped loudly, in earnest, startling them both.

“Uh, right—Go ahead and turn off the heat,” Zack instructed, scrambling to back on track to teaching. He forced the frustration down for the moment, quickly searching for spoons as he heard the burner click off. Spoons secured, he handed one to Sephiroth. “Now we taste it and see if it needs extra seasoning.”

Sephiroth did, carefully scooping some broth and blowing carefully before taking a sip. “…It tastes fine to me,” he concluded.

Zack tried a taste himself, testing the flavors and determining it definitely needed more salt. And some pepper. After a stir and another taste, Zack nodded, satisfied. “That’s better. You go ahead and dish this out,” he told Sephiroth. “I’m gonna toast the bread I got.” Setting about their tasks in a somewhat more somber manner than before, Zack sliced and prepped the bread with a faint scowl.

He couldn’t get the blasé delivery out of his head. Like the whole ordeal of growing up in Shinra was just Sephiroth’s standard. Something wildly off base from any sense of typical childhood. Staring at his reflection in the working toaster, Zack could only wonder what else Sephiroth missed out on—Clearly no family cooking lessons. But, with no other kids around, what about sleepovers? Birthday parties? Even just silly little games, like *tag?*

All of it forsaken, just so PR could have their precious poster boy.

"…man, *fuck* PR," Zack stated emphatically, feeling a smidge better when he heard a surprised chuckle from Sephiroth. Zack checked on him, finding Sephiroth watching him somewhat pensively, in turn.

"I'd have thought you'd be mad at me, not Shinra," Sephiroth said.

"Why would I be mad at you?" Zack questioned, the thought never even occurring to him.

"Your dream is to be a hero," Sephiroth recalled, gathering the bowls of soup to bring them to the table. "Meanwhile, I'm the one with that title, despite not wanting it. It's a position that breeds resentment."

"Maybe, but you're not the one who decided any of that," Zack pointed out with a grimace. "PR did. I'm mad at *them*, not you." As Sephiroth relaxed, taking a seat at the table to wait, Zack wracked his brain for why Sephiroth would even think such a thing. All too soon, the answer dawned on him—on just what, or who*,* rather, would have made it seem like Sephiroth was the asshole, just for being Shinra's hero. "I'm not *Genesis*," Zack grumbled bitterly.

"No," Sephiroth laughed, eyeing Zack with amusement. "You couldn't be less similar, in fact."

Zack fumed over the whole situation. How sad it was. How undeserved. How Sephiroth just seemed to accept that fate, and the fault. Zack wanted to help, somehow, but even he wasn't sure if his next request was for Sephiroth, or for himself. "Can I hug you?" Zack asked.

"…Alright," Sephiroth agreed, albeit with much confusion.

Making his way to the table, Zack bent to wrap his arms around Sephiroth's shoulders. "…'m sorry they put you through all that," Zack mumbled into the embrace.

Sephiroth softly leaned into him, sighing quietly. "I'm accustomed to it, at this point," he said. "My life has never been, nor will ever be, normal."

Zack scowled in sympathy at the words, ignoring the pop of the toaster to keep stubbornly hugging Sephiroth. A hug wouldn't resolve things, of course. Zack couldn't help with what Shinra had already done—all that was in the past. Untouchable.

He could, however, try to make Sephiroth's future not resemble that depressing shit in any way, shape, or form.

"Maybe we can't make your life totally normal, but that doesn't mean I'm not gonna try," Zack announced, straightening to address Sephiroth with a determined smile. "I'm gonna give you every ounce of 'normal' we can think of—Cooking lessons, and hangouts, and movie nights! The whole shebang!"

Sephiroth was, in short, baffled by the declaration. "Why?"

"Because that's what friends do!"

"…oh."

Zack hated the way he said it. Like he was genuinely astounded by his current circumstances. Sephiroth's confusion only brought Zack more clarity on the man's friendships with Angeal, and Genesis, as well—if 'friendship' was even the right word, at this point. As Zack went to retrieve the bread, he grew only more resolute in his goal—That, not only would he show Sephiroth what a normal friendship—one not tied up entirely in assumptions and PR nonsense—looked like, but he'd help Sephiroth find more people to click with, besides. People that could tell the difference between the image, and reality.

While the bread had a little time to cool, Zack still had to work quickly, fingertips grasping and tapping on the hot crusts just long enough to transport it. Grabbing some butter, he brought it back to the table. "You can go ahead and start eating," he told Sephiroth. "I'm gonna grab a drink. You want anything?"

"Just water," Sephiroth said, already lifting a spoonful of soup to his lips. As Zack futzed about the cabinets, Sephiroth added, "Thank you for…all of this."

"Of course," Zack replied. Once he had both his and Sephiroth's waters in hand, he returned to the table. Setting Sephiroth's down, he grinned, recalling, "Y'know, my Pops always says the best ingredient to a good meal isn't even food." He playfully nudged Sephiroth's shoulder with his fist. "It's having good company."

Sephiroth's lips twitched into an amused smirk, eating another spoonful as Zack sat down. Looking over their collaborative meal, a warm contentedness spread across the whole of him. "…I think I understand what he meant," Sephiroth said with a smile.

While spending time with Sephiroth helped a ton with recharging Zack's social battery, all too soon it was being drained again by the mission grind. Not only to the point of consuming his entire work day, but also cutting into what precious little downtime he had left. Even now, having successfully convinced Aerith to a nice, casual date, Zack couldn't get away from work-related shenanigans, his ear glued to his PHS as he willed the Second on the other end to hurry up and get to the point.

"*We're hoping for more intel soon. We did finally get that turncoat you caught to crack, though,*" the Second informed him. "*Apparently, his associate is a tricky one. Even he doesn't know who they really are—the most we've been able to glean is that they've got a grudge against a SOLDIER operative who was in the Wutai operation. That probably means you, Zack*."

"Right," Zack said, casting a glance at where Aerith was happily chatting with one of the shopkeepers. She was too busy catching up with people she knew in this little market to mind, but Zack still tapped his foot with impatience—the call was important, of course, but why couldn't it have come *later?*

"*That's all we know at this point,*" the Second said, sounding similarly frustrated. "*If he's not in our intelligence network, that might mean he specializes in espionage.*"

Zack grimaced. Having Wutai spies in Midgar was stressful enough. The last one they caught wasn't even Wutaian—the guy was just a jilted employee of the Company, with a grudge. As if SOLDIER didn't have enough to deal with. Zack hated to think there was another spy running around somewhere, with any disguise—could be anyone on the Plate, including within Shinra itself. Or even right here, in the Slums.

Looking around and spotting the several guarded expressions of the civilians, nervously eyeing his SOLDIER uniform, Zack felt very ill at ease.

He couldn't show that unease though. Not here. Especially not on a date. "Well, let me know if you guys find anything else out," Zack chirped optimistically, smiling at Aerith when she curiously turned at the words.

"*Will do, Zack. And again, thank you for all the help. Our team's been swamped.*"

“Yeah, I hear ya,” Zack huffed, thinking of all the pending missions on his own plate. “I’ll keep an eye out.” They each said their quick goodbyes, and Zack walked toward Aerith with an only slightly exaggerated sigh.

“Pretty busy, huh?” Aerith noted with sympathy.

“No kidding,” Zack confirmed. “Would you believe, when I joined, I thought the whole job would just be getting sent out to cool places to take down monsters?” He pouted, hands on his hips as he petulantly complained. “Turns out, to do that, you gotta do stuff like *coordinate* and fill out *paperwork*.”

Aerith giggled. “So, what’s the monster of the week?”

“Uh,” Zack faltered, rapidly going through his mental bestiary for what he even fought that week. With so many missions lately, they all blurred together, and his brain gave up entirely. The only answer it provided was unhelpful static. “…I forgot,” Zack groaned.

Drawing her hand to her lips in a feigned gasp, Aerith’s eyes widened. “A memory-stealing monster! How scary,” she declared dramatically. Then, with a grin, she added, “No wonder you keep forgetting to answer texts.”

Zack laughed helplessly. “I’m *sorry!*” he insisted. “I do read everything, I promise!”

“Uh-*huh*.”

The thought of his texts instantly brought to mind that Aerith wasn’t the only one he left on read, lately. “…and I just remembered there’s a Third I need to check in with, too,” Zack sighed again, tiredly eyeing the shimmering jewelry for sale on the table next to them. This was *not* the time for him to be thinking about all this *work*. Zack straightened, very serious as he stated, “Never mind! I’m focused! It’s fine!”

“Is it, really?” Aerith asked, dropping her own cheekiness for genuine concern. “If you’ve got important stuff to do…”

“It’s just this guy I’ve been mentoring,” Zack clarified with a wave of his hand. “He told me he’s finally ready to fight on his own. He’s got a team going with him, though, so I meant to remind him they’re all there to watch each other’s backs.” Explanation through, and determined to switch topics, Zack gestured at the table of goods.

“More importantly, how’s the shopping? See anything you like?”

“I did!” Aerith brightened, taking Zack’s hand to lead him to another shop, just down the way. The display was full of accessories, most notably brightly colored ribbons, which Aerith pointed to. “Look at these. Aren’t they cute?”

“Which one’s your favorite?” Zack asked.

“Hmm…This one,” Aerith decided, pointing at the pink one. “It’s a pretty color.”

“Alright. I’m gonna buy it,” Zack announced, already pulling out his wallet.

“Wha—Wait! You don’t have to!” Aerith stammered, flustered.

“I know I don’t, but I want to,” Zack insisted, grinning at her. “I think it’ll look great on you.”

The desire for the ribbon and the worry about politeness were clearly at war within Aerith, as she pursed her lips and glanced between the ribbon and Zack. “…really?”

“We can call it a memento for today,” Zack decided. Within no time, gil was exchanged, and Zack had the ribbon in hand. “Here, turn around,” he instructed. “I can tie it over your ponytail for you.”

Excitedly spinning to face away from Zack, Aerith asked, “Make sure it’s even, okay?”

“Sure. It’s like tying shoe laces, right?” Zack chuckled.

“Don’t your shoes have zippers?” Aerith shot back, accusingly, clearly lacking confidence in his ribbon tying abilities.

Zack laughed, but did take extra special care to arrange the ribbon. He fiddled with it for a few more moments, ensuring each side was definitely the same length. While he might not have the best eye for stuff like this, he was reasonably certain Aerith would look nice, as it was. Though, when Aerith turned back around, examining his handiwork in the shop’s small mirror, he happily reevaluated his skills.

She looked adorable.

“Thank you, Zack!” Aerith said, absolutely beaming. “I’ll treasure it.”

With that settled, the pair decided to walk around a bit more—see the sights. Aerith led Zack out of the market, back to the crowded streets of the Slums. There was a park nearby, apparently, that they could relax in.

As they walked, Aerith clasped her hands behind her back, regarding Zack with a cheerful smile. “I’ve been meaning to ask—How did the flowers hold up?”

“Pretty good!” Zack reported. “Though, I am gonna need another one. Think we could wander by the church later? It really cheered me up to have some greenery in my new place.”

“Sure,” Aerith agreed easily. She opened her mouth to continue, only to hesitate, brushing a stray hair behind her ear before continuing. “… and, what about Sephiroth’s?”

Zack thought back, realizing he never did ask what Sephiroth had done with the lily Aerith gave him. “I’ll have to check,” Zack informed her. “I’m sure Seph appreciated it, though.”

“Calling him Seph, now, huh?” Aerith inquired with a grin.

“I’m not gonna be formal with him *all* the time,” Zack groused. “Plus his name’s, like, three syllables.”

“You didn’t seem very formal with him to start with,” Aerith laughed.

“He’s a friend!” Zack countered, crossing his arms over his chest, even as he grinned. “Or, what, I should be more formal in general? Should I be calling you Miss Aerith?”

Aerith hummed, thinking as the gate to the park came into view. “Not formal enough. Maybe something like, *your ladyship*.”

“Ah, right,” Zack laughed, jogging ahead a few steps to dramatically bow and gesture. “Then, shall I escort you to the park proper, *your ladyship?*”

“You shall,” she declared, grinning as she haughtily lifted her chin, and put out her hand for Zack to take.

Zack took it, neither of them able to take the act seriously as they laughed their way to the playground. The few children in the park left almost as soon as Zack and Aerith got there, leaving them to themselves. While the equipment was run-down, there was a certain

undeniable charm to the cartoony animal-shaped slide. A little bright spot, here in the Slums, all for them.

“I can’t actually imagine you being formal, even for work,” Aerith noted, making her way toward the worn swing set.

“I can be,” Zack argued, even if he couldn’t actually think of a time when he was. Probably with Lazard. “…pretty sure I have been, with Seph,” he added, even though, as he wracked his brain, the only memories he had were of being pretty casual. It was probably fine—Sephiroth seemed more comfortable with *less* formality, at any rate.

“Maybe you’re both just different at work,” Aerith determined, facing Zack again rather than sitting on the swing.

“…how do you mean?”

“Well…*Seph* didn’t seem very much like what the papers say, either,” Aerith shrugged, though from her smile Zack could tell she didn’t mean anything bad by it. “He was a little more awkward than I expected,” she giggled lightly.

Amused, Zack nodded, knowingly. “He can be,” Zack acknowledged, because he had plenty of evidence, first-hand. Sephiroth *was* a bit awkward, but kind enough to make it endearing. Guy just wasn’t super comfortable in social situations.

…which, now that Zack knew more about how little Sephiroth even got the chance to socialize, did sour Zack’s thoughts, some.

“Is something wrong, Zack?” Aerith asked, approaching him again.

Doing a brief scan of the area, ensuring they really did have the park to themselves, Zack rubbed the back of his neck, debating. Maybe it wasn’t info he should share with Aerith, but Sephiroth didn’t present it as some kind of secret. Hell, he barely seemed bothered by it, even if Zack was still absolutely irate at how PR set shit up. “He told me he, uh…grew up ‘inside Shinra,’ whatever that means,” Zack explained softly. “Said he didn’t really get to talk much with other people for…a long time.”

“Inside…Shinra?” Aerith repeated slowly, stiffening. “Not…one of Shinra’s orphanages, or something?”

One of the Company-run orphanages would have made the most sense, but Zack was pretty certain that wasn’t what Sephiroth was

referring to—Especially with no other kids around him, growing up. Though, the thought of orphanages, as well as recalling Sephiroth's own mention of *caretakers,* brought Zack to the unfortunate conclusion that Sephiroth's parents were decidedly out of the picture.

Noticing Aerith watching him with eyes wide with worry, Zack shook his head. "Didn't sound like it."

Aerith went quiet, one hand clenched into a fist over her heart.

They stood in silence for a while. For so long, in fact, that Zack regarded her with concern. "Are *you* okay?" he asked, not expecting the question to make her startle as it did.

"Oh, yes! Fine," she insisted, though the reassurance fell a little short as she winced. "I just…I haven't heard anything good about… situations like that."

"Really?" Zack questioned, wondering now if maybe it was more common knowledge to Midgar's locals, than out-of-towners like him. "I mean…Yeah, I didn't get the impression he had a great time with it." More assuredly, he added, "I did tell him I'm gonna make sure he gets some doses of regular childhood stuff. Maybe drag him over to my place for sleepovers and video games, y'know?"

Aerith's expression softened as she smiled. "That's really nice of you."

"You want in?" Zack suggested with a grin. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of the idea sooner, in fact. Aerith picked up on the difference between PR's Sephiroth versus *Seph*. It was perfect. "I think you'll get along, and then we could all hang out and do that stuff together!"

Tentatively, Aerith brightened at the prospect. "What would we do?" She gestured around the park. "I'm not sure he could just waltz around down here."

"I dunno," Zack admitted, his hands on his hips as he looked around for ideas. Aerith was right—it would be difficult to bring Sephiroth out to public places, with all his fame. They would need something more private. "I bet we could do something at the church," Zack thought aloud, turning back to Aerith with his own, building excitement. "I could bring board games, or we could do a little indoor picnic, or something!"

"Ooh, yes!" Aerith clapped her hands together, now fully on board.

“Can we? I’d love that!”

“Then it’s decided!” Zack stated with glee. “Operation: Normal Kid Stuff is a go!”

“Hooray!” Aerith cheered, raising a triumphant fist. Though, as she did, she realized something, shrinking back down a smidge. “Oh, but Zack—won’t this make you even more busy?”

“This is *fun* busy,” Zack corrected. “Totally different. I’ll figure something out.” He would also need to figure out how to get Sephiroth to the Slums undetected. As well as make sure they both had the time off to do any of this. But, that was a problem for later. For now, he had plans to make, for friend hangouts.

And, as he thought of it, more stuff with Aerith, in general, too—he didn’t want to go another couple months without getting to see her in person.

“If you think of anything you wanna just do as dates, too, let me know,” he told her.

Aerith feigned another gasp, but she couldn’t fully hid her delighted expression behind her hands. “You mean…*two* dates? Are you changing the deal?”

The deal, of course, being for only *one* date. Zack laughed, but fell prey to the fear the she might only have wanted one, after all. “Uh. I mean…If you want to…?”

“Don’t be silly,” Aerith laughed joyfully. “Of course I do.”

Seedy Syndicate

Chapter Summary

> Zack's personal plans shift to the back burner, as the horrors he deals with as a SOLDIER really start to stack up.

Chapter Notes

> Was writing down to the wire ngl lmao but finished on time! For those who have played through CC's Wutai Spies missions, just letting y'all know ahead of time I've tweaked the final mission a smidge. As silly and fun as it is in-game, I thought it would be more fun from a writing perspective (and for some of Starstruck's themes as a whole) to play it for drama :3c

While coordinating mission details was a bit of a drag, coordinating hangouts with friends was a walk in the park. Usually, anyway. Zack thought, with his knowledge of scheduling out time with Sephiroth from within the Shinra system itself, it would be an easy matter to find when their schedules overlapped enough to go see Aerith. At the very least, he could try to find time to float the idea to Sephiroth in the first place.

Doing even that much, though, was proving more difficult than Zack anticipated.

Sephiroth's schedule was packed on a good day, but this particular month had so many blocks of PR bullshit and meetings, that there was hardly even space for Zack to work in a bite at the Mess together. Zack pursed his lips at his PHS, thinking. He might need assistance figuring out if there was some other time that worked—Zack didn't like the idea of scheduling something right after a mission. Sephiroth needed some downtime somewhere.

…even if Zack wasn't really seeing any on the calendar.

Calling Sephiroth instead, Zack began pacing around his apartment. By the second ring, Zack was already brainstorming messages to leave him—it would have to be something that didn't imply they were goofing off on the clock, after all.

Thankfully, Sephiroth picked up on the third ring. "*Zack,*" he acknowledged, the word half a sigh of exhaustion.

“Heya,” Zack greeted brightly. “Was trying to find some time to train together, but, uh…Is your schedule really that packed?”

Sephiroth was quiet for a few moments, only to let out a more irritated sigh, this time. “*So it is,*” he confirmed.

“For real?” Zack groaned, wondering how Sephiroth was doing it all. “I’d be going nuts if I was you. There’s no missions you can push onto me, instead?” he joked.

“*Are you volunteering?*”

Zack snickered, only to hesitate. Mentally weighing his own mission schedules against Sephiroth’s—one far-flung mission for a few days wouldn’t be *so* bad, after all. “Maybe?” he offered dubiously, unsure now if Sephiroth would take him up on it. “If it meant I got a chance to see you at some point this month.”

“*No guarantee of that, I’m afraid,*” Sephiroth stated flatly.

The tone threw Zack off, momentarily—the roughness of Sephiroth’s voice. Like he’d just woken up. But, it was nearly the end of the work day. Surely Sephiroth had been up for hours already. “…Hey, you good, man?” Zack inquired, hand on his him as he frowned vaguely in the direction of his kitchen. “You sound out of it.”

“*Fine. More insomnia, that’s all.*”

Zack winced in sympathy. “Pain in the ass, with the schedule you’ve got.”

“*I’ll manage,*” Sephiroth claimed. “*I’ve at least located a few of the missing reports in the Data Room, during the nights I haven’t slept.*”

“Anything useful?” Zack asked, mind drifting to Angeal—they hadn’t heard or seen anything in months. About Angeal, or Genesis. Apart from wayward G copies, both seemed to be staying out of Shinra’s eye for the time being.

“*…not especially.*”

“Maybe you need some different reading material,” Zack suggested somewhat snarkily. “Like a bedtime story. Or maybe reread that textbook you got—that’d put me right to sleep.”

That, at least, earned Zack a small chuckle. “*It may serve as a*

distraction, at any rate," he conceded. Then, more firmly, said, "*I have to go. Meeting.*"

"Try to get some rest after," Zack told him.

"*We'll see*," Sephiroth stated, all pessimism. "*Until next time.*"

Almost as soon as Zack said his own goodbye, Sephiroth hung up, leaving Zack to frown in flummoxed frustration at his PHS. Didn't even have time to *mention* Aerith. What's more, Sephiroth continuing to investigate Project G was troubling.

I guess he's searching for a cure for the degradation…? Zack mused, only leading him to wonder why. Hollander was with Genesis. Sephiroth wasn't a scientist, either. If the guy who headed the whole project couldn't find a cure, what hope did they have?

Not to mention, he was a little surprised Sephiroth was still trying to help them, given…everything.

Zack sighed, shaking his head to reorient his thoughts, and then moving to grab his equipment. The biggest issue, he thought, as he shoved on his boots, wasn't Sephiroth's choice of late night study sessions. It was the fact that they had no damn time to see each other. Let alone get Operation: Normal Kid Stuff rolling.

He sounded like he wanted a distraction, Zack recalled, connecting his sword to the magnet on his back before heading out the door. He could think of ideas while on the move. There might be someone on the SOLDIER Floor to alleviate Zack's own need for socialization—Hopefully Kunsel. Kunsel might be able to help Zack brainstorm some ways to insert some fun into Sephiroth's schedule.

His wanderings to the SOLDIER Floor were uneventful, beyond the general slowing of work. This close to end of business, there was a quiet anticipation in the building, as everyone waited for the clock to run down. More than a few employees ducked out a bit early, so Zack wasn't surprised when he reached the SOLDIER Floor just to find no one in the immediate vicinity.

Heading toward the lounge, Zack didn't see Kunsel, but he did spot a familiar face.

The Third spotted him too, beaming brightly and waving. "Zack!"

"Hey, man!" Zack acknowledged his mentee with a grin. "How's it

going?"

"I did what you said for my last mission," the Third said, approaching him with excitement. "Focusing on everybody having each other's backs made it *way* easier—We brought back the stolen cargo, no sweat!"

"Alright! See, I knew you could do it," Zack told him proudly, giving the Third an affectionate pat on his pauldron. "How about the fighting? That go any better?"

"*So* much better," the Third assured with a laugh. "Those tips you gave me about elemental weaknesses really came in handy."

Remembering his own progress with Sephiroth's precision tutelage, Zack was relieved his advice proved to be similarly effective. "That's great. I'll bet you'll make Second in no time."

Chuckling bashfully, the Third rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know about that, but *some* improvement makes me feel like I can maybe handle my Third Class missions, at least." Then, brightening again, he added, "Oh! And the other Third I was taking point with was really cool! We're going out for drinks, later!"

"Aced your mission *and* made a new friend," Zack praised, impressed. "Sounds like you're really starting to hit your stride!"

"Couldn't have done it without you," the Third asserted, just before his PHS beeped. Checking it, he turned to head out, saying, "Oh, my Commander wants to see me. I'll talk to you later, Zack!"

"Sure, good luck with your next mission!" Zack called after him.

"Thank you again for all your help," the Third said. "I'm gonna make you proud!" And with that, he ran off, leaving Zack alone on the SOLDIER Floor.

Quickly grabbing his own PHS, Zack navigated to the mission registry, dismayed that he only remembered *now* to check it. Though, once he found the mission about the stolen cargo, he let out a long, aggravated groan. "Right," he grumbled. "Multiple people on point…" Which meant, multiple names on the report. Meaning he had *no* idea which one belonged to the Third he trained.

He was really running out of chances to figure all this out.

Zack didn't expect to be in the Slums again so soon, but much to his chagrin, he wasn't there to spend time with Aerith. Instead, he was trailing behind the Second in charge of the Wutai spies case, in the same little market Zack and Aerith had their date. If they wrapped this up quick enough, Zack *might* be able to go say hi—

"Fan out and search for anyone acting suspicious," ordered the Second to their accompanying Security team.

"So, this extra intel," Zack began, catching the Second's attention as the officers headed off. "You're positive they're in the Slums?"

"The Turks helped out with the interrogation," the Second informed him. "Though, as for anti-Shinra elements in the Slums, that admittedly doesn't narrow things down very much."

"I'll start looking around on my own," Zack decided. "If they've got a grudge against me, I might be able to draw them out."

The Second nodded sternly. "We'll keep an ear out if you need assistance. Good luck."

With that, Zack strolled out of the marketplace, and onto the streets. It was midday, and reasonably crowded with the lunchtime rush. Zack only saw the faces of tired, mildly wary civilians milling about—no one glaring daggers in his direction, or any other such signs of vitriol. Though, Zack reasoned, the spy wouldn't be one of Wutai's best if they made their hatred *that* obvious.

Another issue Zack quickly found was that he had no idea where to search. The Slums were huge, and sprawling, with plenty of places to hide. There were only so many spots he was familiar with, besides. Resolving to check those, first, Zack made his way toward the park, hopeful he'd run into Aerith, or maybe someone who had noticed something out of the ordinary.

As the passersby eyed him up and down, nervous and curious at SOLDIER's presence, Zack worried he might actually be the odd one out, himself.

The park was peaceful, with only a couple of kids making use of the rightmost bear-shaped structure to explore, both too busy with their games to notice him. It was quieter, this far from the marketplace, providing a relaxing little oasis in the city. All as it should be.

Yet, somewhere in that city, hidden in plain sight, was someone with

a vendetta *specifically* against Zack.

Zack leaned against the wall of the main gate, frowning as he wracked his brain for culprits. Only one person came to mind—that Crescent Unit captain he pissed off back at Fort Tamblin. But, to come all the way to Midgar? Just to, what, make good on his promise to take Zack's head?

Would Zack even recognize the guy, out of uniform?

His stomach twisted in discomfort at the memory—of the captain on the ground, admonishing Zack for not finishing the job. Zack still felt like he made the right decision, leaving him alive. The fight hadn't been against *SOLDIER*. Not really. It was against Shinra—against the idea that the Company would 'torture' people who didn't fall in line.

Back then, Zack couldn't conceive of why the man saw them that way. Now, as he looked around the surrounding walls of scrap—the decrepit remnants of Old Midgar, left to flounder while the Plate flourished—Zack had the sinking feeling he just…missed what the Company was doing. Even here, those not seen as useful to Shinra were left down below, even if they sang the Company's praises.

Up top, Zack now knew that *real* dissent, like desertion, lead to a massive target on your back.

…*Gotta focus*, Zack reminded himself, tiredly rubbing the back of his neck. He could mull over the shadier aspects of Shinra and how it fit together with Wutai's insurgents *later*. Right now, he had a job to do, and a threat to neutralize.

Just when he was about to leave, he spotted a woman peering out from behind the slide.

Her blonde hair was cut short, and she wore a smart, expertly pressed suit—wildly out of place with the more casual wear in the Slums. She didn't seem to be the parent of the two playing children, either, judging from her disdainful sneer. As Zack watched, the woman finally met Zack's gaze, startling and zipping right back behind the slide again.

"Well, that's definitely weird," Zack muttered to himself, heading over to investigate.

The kids watched him for a moment, quiet and curious, but when he passed them they simply ignored him, running off toward the swings.

When Zack reached the other side of the slide, the woman was still there, wearing a smug little smirk as she set her shoulders. “Looking for me?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Zack answered, crossing his arms over his chest. The intel hadn’t included an actual gender for the spy—they could very well be this extremely suspicious woman. “What exactly are you doing here?”

“One of the most important jobs of all, of course,” the woman said haughtily, straightening her suit jacket with pride. “You’re really lucky—the clues to finding us were *especially* difficult.”

How much does Wutai know about our task squad? Zack wondered, frowning concernedly. “…yeah,” he agreed vaguely.

“Some people don’t even think we’re real!” the woman tittered, covering her lips with the tips of her fingers. “It’s a miracle you have the chance to join.”

“…*Join?*” Zack questioned, thrown off immediately. If the Crescent Unit was ever going to try and recruit him, Zack figured that offer would have *long* since expired.

“Of course!” the woman chirped excitedly. “It is, naturally, dependent on your ability to pass the entrance exam.” Then, growing far more serious, she focused on Zack with an intensely focused stare. “Now, let’s begin.”

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to *ask* me if I want to join the—?!”

“Question One: What is the name of Sephiroth’s sword?” she asked quickly. “Your options are: Kikuichimonji, Masamune, or the Buster Sword.”

Zack stared at her, opened mouthed, having no idea what the question had to do with any sort of anti-Shinra schemes. Especially since anyone who knew about Sephiroth also knew about his sword. “… Masamune?” Zack provided.

“Correct!” the woman said with a smile, only for it to be instantly wiped away as she continued. “Question Two: What is the name of Sephiroth’s ultimate attack? Options are: Supernova, Megaflare, and Omnislash.”

That question had Zack’s immediate attention. *Angeal didn’t even know that,* he recalled. *How does Wutai…?* “Supernova,” he answered

slowly, reasoning that perhaps Sephiroth used it against Wutai's soldiers, maybe when Angeal wasn't around—

"Correct *again,*" she praised, impressed. "Now, Question Three: In which hand does Sephiroth hold his sword? Your options are: His right hand, his left hand, or both."

Zack was, once again, very lost as to why a Wutai spy was quizzing him so hard on his mentor. Sephiroth's dominant hand wasn't exactly a secret—more so just something you might miss if you weren't paying attention. "…left hand," Zack said, narrowing his eyes at the woman.

"*Correct!*" she cheered. "Congratulations! You are now a chosen member of the *Silver Elite!*"

The declaration was met with a moment of baffled silence.

"The *what?*" Zack eventually blurted out, hands dropping to his sides.

"The Silver Elite!" the woman repeated with a light laugh, looking only mildly confused that Zack wasn't aware. "Only the most illustrious Sephiroth fan club in existence! Here," she started, pulling out a PHS. "Tell me your email—we can get you signed up immediately."

"But—I wasn't here to—?"

"Only current members are allowed to recruit new ones, and we only recruit two times a year!" she continued, seemingly aghast that Zack didn't understand her seriousness. "You may never have this chance again!"

Weighing his options, Zack ultimately sighed, and input his email into her device. If she was a Wutai spy, she was playing the long con, and it would be better to play along so he could figure all this nonsense out. If she wasn't, well…

…he supposed he'd just be getting some silly fan info that he and Sephiroth could hopefully laugh about.

"And there we go!" the woman declared triumphantly putting her PHS back in her pocket. "Now, typically our moderators are very efficient —"

Zack's PHS pinged in his pocket.

"—and they never disappoint!" she finished cheerfully. "Sounds like you got your first exclusive mail."

Dubious, Zack pulled out his own device to check. Sure enough, he had a new email in his inbox, from the alleged Silver Elite. "The scent of silver winds…?" Zack scoffed at the subject line, only to read:

Dear members of the Silver Elite:

In this update, we present another piece of Sephiroth trivia—the secrets to his beautiful long hair.

The hair products he uses are of the highest grade, made and supplied by the Shinra Company.

He seems to use one whole bottle of both shampoo and conditioner every time he washes his hair.

They are scented with thirteen kinds of perfumes, including Rose and Vanilla.

Apparently, the scent in the air after Sephiroth tosses his hair changes daily!

Zack read through it a second time. And then once more, for good measure. He shut his eyes, inwardly groaning, *She really is just a Sephiroth fan…*

"Congrats again on your membership," the woman told him gleefully. "The Silver Elite is a prestigious fan club that was established more than twenty years ago—Only our chairwoman knows the details of its long history." She grew somewhat wistful, then, drawing her hand to her chin. "She never shows herself in public, though. We only know each other by mail. I wonder what she's like in person…"

"Right, yeah, I'm sure she's great," Zack mumbled quickly, annoyed at himself as he pocketed his PHS again. Once he did, though, his brain caught up to one of the woman's earlier statements, and Zack directed another baffled look her way. "Wait, you said over *twenty* years ago?"

"That's right!" she confirmed with a prideful nod. "The first, and *best*, Sephiroth fan club ever established."

Zack's mind reeled at the thought of it—Zack wasn't even twenty, yet. He was pretty sure Sephiroth was in his twenties, to start with. After all, when Zack was first reading the papers about him, Sephiroth had

been pretty young, himself—a teenager, at most.

Which put the creation of this fan club at some point when Sephiroth was a literal *child*—

And with dread creeping through his veins, Zack remembered Sephiroth's descriptions of his childhood. How Shinra decided *for* him, that he would be in SOLDIER. Shinra was hardly above using children for the Company's benefit. In fact, if Zack threw Project G into the mix, they had multiple, *documented* instances of doing so.

The woman before him didn't seem like a PR shill, watching Zack like she expected a heartfelt thanks, which Zack took to mean she hadn't really put the pieces together about Sephiroth's age. Probably didn't know much beyond whatever the Silver Elite put out—even if Sephiroth's shampoo habits were, admittedly, not something Zack had known prior. If they were even accurate.

"Is something wrong?" the woman asked.

"…No," Zack sighed frustratedly. More shit he wanted to talk to Sephiroth about, and no time to do it. "No, I just…gotta get going. Thanks," he told her, and then turned to leave.

Before he even made it around the slide, he heard one of the kids yell, "*There* you are! What took you so long?"

Another child had run into the park, looking grumpy as he ran over to his friends. "Sorry, there's a bunch of stupid Security Officers around," he complained. "You guys wanna play SOLDIER? I'll be Zack!"

Zack stopped in his tracks, surprised to hear his own name in a children's game.

"Who even is that?" the little girl in the group asked, still swinging. "Is he in SOLDIER? I've never heard of him."

Before Zack could even think to pout, the boy swinging with her hopped to the ground, declaring, "Oh, who cares! He always wants to be Zack. I'll be Sephiroth."

"Then I'm gonna be a dragon!" the girl proclaimed, leaping off the swing and lifting her hands up as if they were deadly dragon's claws. She let out a high-pitched, giggly roar, running at the new boy and yelling "Fire breath attack!"

The newcomer darted to the side as their play battle commenced, grabbing a stick stashed beneath the climbing bear. He swung it in front of him, like a sword, shouting, “Come and get it!” at the girl. As she roared and stomped toward him, he twirled his stick above his head.

Twirled it, Zack realized, *exactly* the way Zack typically did.

Guess I’ve got some fans, now, too, he thought, his concerns about the skeletons in Shinra’s closet warring with his own warm sense of personal pride. He leaned on the side of the slide, opting to watch for a while and satisfy his own curiosity. He could search for spies again in a minute or two.

Within that minute or two though, it became rapidly apparent that the kid playing as him was making an absolute pest of himself—Jumping in unnecessarily. Boasting real loud, and interrupting the boy playing Sephiroth—even interrupting the *dragon* to play at being a pompous hero.

Zack was only just starting to worry about how PR was actually portraying him in the news clips, when the boy disengaged from the fight altogether.

“And then, Zack gets taken out by a secret Wutai ninja!” the boy declared, and proceeded to grasp dramatically at his chest, feigning terrible injury, before tumbling to the ground in his demise.

“What the…?” Zack couldn’t help but utter, approaching the group. The boy remained on the ground, even as his friends rolled their eyes and continued their own game, and Zack stopped just short of the new kid. “Heya,” he addressed the boy sternly, hands on his hips. “What was that about Zack getting taken out by a ninja?”

The boy scrambled to get up, directing a questioning look at Zack before he proudly puffed out his chest. “Because they’re stronger than SOLDIER, duh!”

“No they’re not!” shouted the boy playing Sephiroth.

“Are too!” shouted the newcomer.

“Sephiroth over there has a point,” Zack noted, more than a little bummed the kid didn’t seem to recognize him. Which was a bit strange, really—

“Wanna bet? Watch this!” the boy demanded, and then took his stick and ran, to climb up the back of the slide. From the top, he recklessly jumped onto the slide itself, standing all the way down before he lunged at the other boy. “Take *that!*” he yelled, making a show of stabbing his friend from behind.

“That’s not enough to take down Sephiroth!” the other boy countered.

“SOLDIER can’t beat me!” the newcomer cackled.

“*Ugh*, you always do this!” the girl complained. “Cut it out!”

Zack’s brow furrowed as he regarded the scene. Something was weird here. The kid seemed convinced Wutai’s army was superior—a far cry from most peoples’ opinions in Midgar, even if they didn’t like Shinra. “Hey, kid,” he tried again, waving the boy back over. “Can we talk a minute?”

The boy merely waved his stick threateningly in Zack’s direction. “What do you want? I’m a proud Wutai soldier!” he reminded Zack, grinning in his superiority. “Are you afraid of me now?”

“I just have some questions—” Zack began, only for the kid to take off running.

“Can’t catch me, you stupid SOLDIER!” he yelled, running for the streets.

“Wait—Dammit!” Zack grumbled, dashing after him to give chase. Much as he didn’t want to accost a kid, the boy was the only lead he had right now. Besides, a kid couldn’t outpace a SOLDIER’s speed, and Zack caught up quickly, grabbing the kid by the arm. “Hey, *listen—”*

“Damn, I’ve been had—!” the boy growled, struggling before reaching into his pocket. He threw the contents immediately to the ground.

Said contents instantly exploded into a massive plume of smoke.

Zack released him in surprise, coughing and squinting through the sudden assault. He could hear the kid take off again, running in the direction of the marketplace. “Get back here!” Zack yelled, all the more convinced the boy had to know *something* about Wutai insurgents. What kid carried around *smoke bombs?*

Unlike before, the boy had picked up the pace, speeding down the street much faster than Zack expected. Weaving through the other

civilians, the boy flipped gracefully over a young woman's head, avoiding a collision and hitting the ground running.

Gawking at the sight, Zack struggled to keep up, shouting once again to try and get the kid to stop. Luckily, he spotted a group from his team just exiting the market at the same time. Zack waved down the Second, indicating the kid and yelling, "He knows something!"

The Second acted fast, snatching the boy's arm just as he was about to run by and lifting him off the ground. He grabbed the boy's other, flailing arm before setting him down again, restraining him. Turning to the Security Officers nearest him, the Second ordered, "Take over and search him."

As they set about their task, the Second approached Zack. "What happened?"

"Thought he was just playing a game with some friends, but he kept talking about Wutai," Zack explained lamely, gesturing weakly at the struggling kid. "I tried to talk to him and he hit me with a smoke bomb. He's gotta know something, right?"

"Sir!" called one of the Security Officers, holding up a small pouch. "He's got Da Chao beans!"

"Da Chao…huh?" Zack repeated, as the Second sighed.

"Detain him for questioning," the Second ordered. "Looks like we have our spy."

"Wait, *what?!*" Zack directed a baffled expression at the other SOLDIER. "Him? He's just a kid!"

"Which would explain how he kept under our radar for so long," the Second explained with a shrug, apparently unaffected by the idea of a child doing elite spy work. "I knew Wutai trains their ninjas young, but he's good. Could've really caught us off guard." Then, amiably, he pat Zack's shoulder. "Great work, Zack."

Zack stared at him, dumbfounded, and then watched as the Security Officers located small weapons in the boy's socks. Knives he could've used on Zack, but hadn't had the opportunity. Small bits of folded paper, with unknown purpose.

All the while, the boy watched Zack in turn, face contorted in unbridled *fury*.

Horrified, Zack stood still as the kid was dragged off by Security, remembering Fort Tamblin. Remembering the little girl he met there, in the midst of all the fighting, claiming to be one of the best ninjas of Wutai—a child, Zack now realized, who may have actually been telling the truth. Wutai really was training kids.

The boy he caught had a vendetta against Zack, and Zack didn't even *know* him.

As civilians whispered and got back to their lives around him, Zack felt adrift. This…wasn't what he became a SOLDIER for. He wasn't in this job to fight and detain *children*.

Though, even as he thought that, he remembered the woman in the park. The Silver Elite. Shinra using children, too, for their own gain.

Wutai and Shinra both, using children to fight the wars of adults.

Something was deeply, *deeply* screwed up, here.

Zack walked numbly back to headquarters, desperate to talk to Sephiroth.

Sephiroth didn't even have time to answer Zack's calls.

Zack texted him after four unanswered call attempts, his pacing now relegated to the SOLDIER Floor, in case Sephiroth happened to stop by. The sky outside was dark, and Zack could watch his own reflection walk restlessly around the lounge. He briefly entertained the idea of going to the Training Room to work off some steam, but he didn't know if fighting VR monsters would help with everything his brain was obsessing over.

Child experimentation. Child soldiers. Child *prisoners*.

And for *what,* exactly?

The Company was always singing the praises of mako energy. Of its safety, and its benefits. Of the quality it brought to life.

Did something *that* good and *that* beneficial really need to experiment on kids, just to…make an army to sell mako?

Grimacing at the myriad of lights from the Plate below, he couldn't wrap his head around it. He was supposed to be taking down *monsters*, as a SOLDIER. That was the whole appeal of the job—to help ensure

all those glittering lights stayed on. To keep people safe. To *improve* lives.

To be a hero.

He couldn't get that Wutai kid's hateful glower out of his mind.

Zack's PHS beeped, and he hastily retrieved it, finding that Sephiroth did get back to him, finally.

Emergency mission, the text read. Won't be back til late.

Flopping onto one of the couches, Zack held his PHS in both hands, scowling at it. There had to be *some* time to talk. Anything. So much was going on that made so little sense, and Zack felt like his head might explode if he didn't talk to *someone* with the clearance to actually explain shit to him.

Tempted to just crash Sephiroth's apartment, Zack texted back jokingly, in a poor attempt to lift his own mood. He told Sephiroth that he could just come visit at 3AM or so. Sephiroth had so many insomnia issues, it might be welcome—and the only time they could meet.

By 3 I would have given up on sleeping, Sephiroth replied, taking Zack's joke entirely seriously. I wouldn't be in my quarters.

So that's how he keeps finding time to go to the Data Room, Zack mused, grumpily texting back that they should just do a sleepover or something, instead. Or even a scheduled time for them both to conk out, instead—At this point he just wanted to *see* Sephiroth. Have some sort of reassurance that Sephiroth was *okay*, despite all the bullshit Shinra put him through.

…all the bullshit Shinra was putting them *both* through.

Zack rubbed his face tiredly with his hand, glaring through his fingers at his reflection in the windows.

The more he learned, and the more he experienced being a First…the worse it all seemed to get.

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